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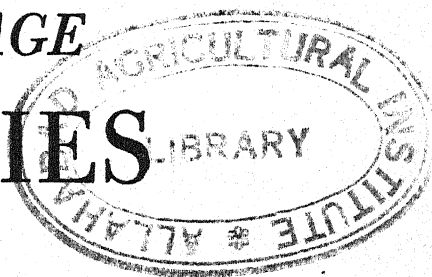
By Stephen Payne

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**TEEN-AGE
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OF
THE WEST**



Edited by
STEPHEN PAYNE



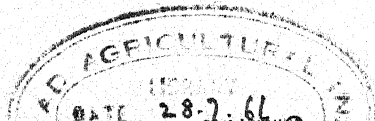
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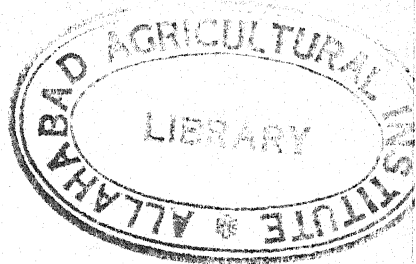
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Introducing

STEVE PAYNE

WHENEVER I take a trip out west, which is as often as I can manage it, I always stop in to visit Steve Payne. It's a sort of renewal of illusion for me, because Steve is about the only western writer I know who looks like a cowboy.

There's a good reason for that—he was a cowboy.

In fact, born and bred a westerner, Steve has been about everything. He's an old-timer now and he can look back through his personal experience at the Golden Age of the West, when the cattleman was king, and remember things the rest of us have only read about.

Though his riding days are over and his transportation is the front seat of a gas buggy, Steve Payne still looks the typical cowboy; lean, wiry, slim-hipped and taciturn. He doesn't talk much, prefers to get it on paper.

And how that man can write a story! There's the unmistakable flavor of the west in his stories, as those of you who have read them in the leading magazines know. The western country he writes about is genuine, not dreamed up. The people Steve writes about are the real westerners he has known and lived with all his life. You feel, when you read a Payne story, that the man knows what he is talking about, that this is the way the country was and these were the people who lived and worked and fought there.

There's something else about his writing which an editor always spots. So many western stories are synthetic and for action's sake are harsh and cruel. His stories have a gentleness about them which is characteristic of the man and is equally typical of so many of the good, friendly hospitable people of the west. Far from being cruel or bleak, it is a wonderful, friendly place, and no one knows this better or expresses it more fluently than Steve. He is gentle and sweet himself, with an underlying core of iron strength that seems perfectly to typify the land he lives in.

There are times when I envy him. He lives in Colorado, with the massive peaks of the mighty Rockies visible from every window of his house. He can look out at the wonderful wild country which has slowly surrendered to civilization, and just by shutting his eyes, remember the days when it was remote wilderness and when a man and his gun were a little self-contained unit, self-supporting, self-defending, beholden to no one and depending on no one.

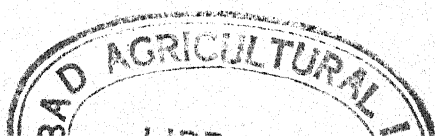
And out of the marvelous well of his memories and the inspiration of the mountains come stories that are so real. They are more than entertainment. They are a little bit of the real story of our country.

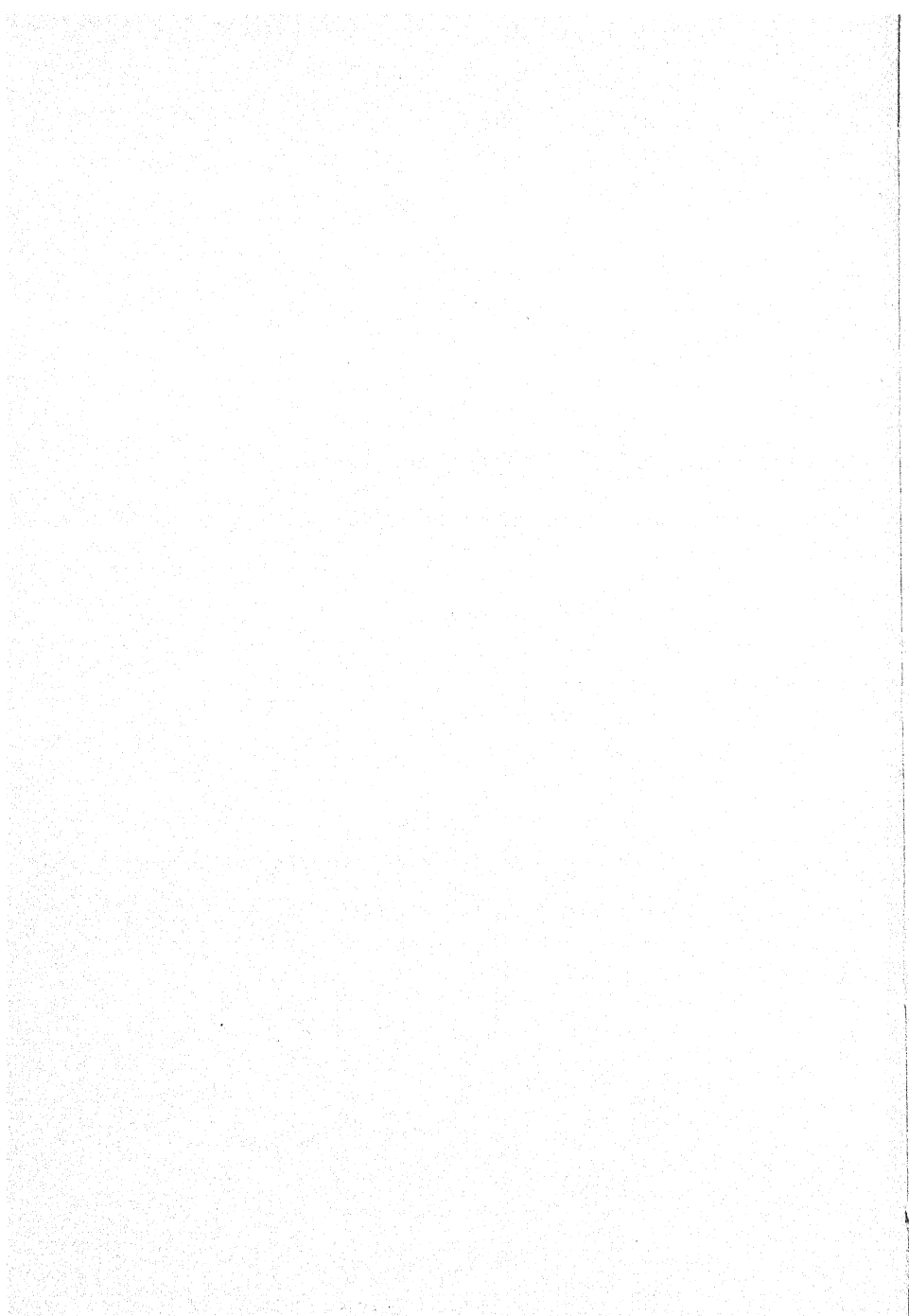
I wish I were a teen-ager again so that I might share with you in the discovery of Stephen Payne. This volume contains the best of *all* the stories Steve Payne has written over the years. I know you'll enjoy them as much as I did—and read them over and over again.

LEO MARGULIES

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S T E P H E N
P A Y N E



Copper

WHEN Clint Dorsey and Jed Holmes first sighted the chestnut stallion and his band, sandy-haired young Clint expressed a desire to catch and tame the wild horse.

For once however Clint found Jed, the older and more experienced cowboy, strangely unsympathetic.

"Oh, sure, o' course," said the leathery old timer, "like any other young buck, you've got a yen to tie onto a wild hoss. But to catch this one we'd have to run down our strings of ponies afore ever we could corral the band. 'Tain't worth it. Clint, forget that hoss."

The two cowboys were range riders for the M 5 cow outfit, their headquarters a lonely camp on a small stream in the heart of a vast land of rolling hills.

Looking after the M 5 cattle in this open country was a life Clint loved. But, after having seen the wild stallion, he could not get the horse out of his

mind. Therefore, he welcomed the day when it became necessary for Jed to ride to the Home Ranch to bring back a pack horse load of grub.

In the late afternoon of that day, Clint made his first attempt to stalk the wild horse. Excitement was like a fire in the cowboy as, on foot, he stole nearer and nearer to his quarry.

Silhouetted atop a sage brush hill, the stallion was even more magnificent than Clint had at first supposed. Alert and watchful, he was standing guard over the thirty-odd mares, some of them with colts, which made up his band. The slanting sunlight playing on his glistening chestnut coat made Clint think of shining gold or burnished copper, and all at once he thought of a fitting name for the wild horse.

"'Copper'! That's it," he exclaimed. "And do I want to own that horse! He's a maverick so he'll be mine—if I catch him."

Clint had brought along his rifle and intended—if only he could get close enough—to crease the stallion. But to the cowboy's bitter disappointment, Copper sighted him long before he was within gunshot.

The stallion voiced a warning whinny like a bugle call and instantly the entire band were off on the dead run, their long tails flying plume-like. Clint watched them out of sight, then returned to where he'd left his saddle horse, and rode slowly to his range camp home. There, to his surprise, he found visitors, three men and five horses, two of which carried packs.



"This is swell," thought Clint, who had seen no one except Jed for the past month.

But as he noticed the sorry looking horses, leg-weary and sorefooted, he wasn't so sure. Like any

true cowpuncher, rough or cruel treatment of cattle or horses always enraged him.

"Hello?" A stocky man, with a fleshy, blue-jowled face, stepped forward to greet the cowboy. "Reckon this is your hang-out. Mind if we camp here tonight?"

"Not at all," said Clint.

"Figured it'd be all right with the range rider," the man resumed. He looked down along the pasture where Clint's and Jed's extra ponies were grazing. "Say, what a string you've got! Nine in the pasture and the one you're ridin'. Jim-dandy ponies."

"Yes?" said Clint noncommittally. Should he explain that two riders held down this range camp? No necessity of doing so, or mentioning that he and Jed each had six saddle horses and that Jed, now absent with two of them, might be expected to return sometime tomorrow.

The big fellow stared hard at the trim-built agile cowboy. "I'll explain right off that we're mustangers," he began.

"Eh?" Clint ejaculated, feeling as if a knife had been thrust into his back. "Mustangers!" Wild horse hunters. They were here to get—to get the chestnut stallion!

"That s'prise you? Well, we trailed a bunch, led by a humdinging stallion, to this range."

"Now you aim to round them up?" Clint asked.

"That's it. Brandin' corral six-seven miles north of your camp. Maybe we can corral 'em there."

Clint expelled his breath with relief. Impossible

for the mustangers to corral Copper and his band, with the saddle stock they had! "Turn your nags in the pasture," he directed. "I'll picket this one I'll use to wrangle with in the morning."

"Good 'nuff," returned the stocky fellow. "Me, I'm Dave Flemming. The runt is Eddie and our tall pard's Wolf Andrews. You're—?"

"Clint Dorsey, punching for the M 5."

Later that evening while Clint was thinking of bed, Dave Flemming appeared at the cabin door.

"Range rider, you care to throw in with us to get them mustangs?"

"I've got other work," Clint said quietly.

Throw in with that bunch? Not while he was in his right senses.

"Sure. But we'll make it worth your while, Clint. You noticed how us boys is pretty near afoot? But you furnish us your string and ride with us, and we'll give you that chestnut stallion. Not another horse like him on the range. Like the proposition?"

For thirty seconds Clint was silent. Nerves tingled the full length of his body. A chance to catch Copper and to call the horse his own! And by using his and Jed's ponies the mustangers could exhaust the mustangs and corral them. But Clint had no right to use M 5 cowponies for this purpose. He felt his face on fire as he answered Dave Flemming.

"Nothing doing, mustanger. Good night."

Flemming stamped back to his camp as if he was furious.

"Well, let him be mad," thought Clint. "Tomorrow those fellows'll drift along since it's the only thing they can do."

Though he was much longer than usual in dropping off to sleep, he was sleeping soundly when awakened by a gruff command:

"Roll out, cowboy! We're usin' your horses and you're helpin' us get them mustangs."

In flickering lamplight Clint saw the tall and rangy Wolf Andrews. The man held a Colt .45 in his right hand. In the yellow light his eyes gleamed like those of a mountain lion as he said, "Do just as I say or I'll let daylight through you."

Helpless rage seething inside him, Clint pulled on shirt and overalls and boots. What a fool to have trusted the mustangers! But it was better now to obey orders than to be shot.

Ahead of Wolf Andrews he stepped out into the first dim light of a new day, and found that Wolf's two companions were busy. They had wrangled the M 5 cavy, their own weary nags as well, and were saddling up.

Dave Flemming greeted Clint pleasantly, "We need your help, cowboy. So if you'll agree to give us a hand and not to run out on us I'll still let you have the chestnut horse."

"And if I don't agree?" Clint shot back.

"We'll leave you snubbed to a corral post. You won't get loose either! . . . Is the deal a bargain?"

"Yes," said Clint, so mad with everything that he bit off the word savagely.

Taking Clint with them, the three mustangers led all the extra horses out across the range. Their first job was to divide those horses into four bunches and tie them in four separate places many miles apart and around the outer edge of a great circle.

After the saddle stock had been placed, Clint rode with Flemming to a distant ridge; Wolf Andrews stationed himself at another vantage point and Eddie, the runt, started the wild horses on what was to be a day long chase. The mustangers hoped to keep the band running in circles and, as Flemming expressed it, "Run 'em down and wear 'em out! Then we can corral 'em."

Quite soon Eddie "jumped" the wild bunch and sent them thundering northward across the hills. He spurred after them at breakneck speed until Wolf Andrews suddenly appeared to relieve him.

Wolf continued the chase, Eddie dropping out for the time being and changing to his second pony. Some five miles from where Wolf had taken over, Clint and Flemming surprised Copper and his band, and turned them toward the east. A few minutes later Flemming yelled to Clint, "Keep 'em goin' lickety blinders. I'll drop down to the southwest and be ready to head 'em off!"

The wild bunch, frantic to escape their relentless pursuers, swerved to the north. Though Clint rode

like a mad man to turn them, he could not gain on them. He was agreeably surprised to see Eddie ziping out of a grove, yelling and waving his hat. The runt, on a fresh mount, had cut across country to thwart just such a move by the chestnut stallion, and the bunch again swerved, speeding southward.

While Eddie tore on after them, Clint, reining his lathered, panting pony to an easy canter, rode east to where fresh ponies for his use had been tied. Changing his saddle to one of these, and picketing his first weary mount, Clint found time to admire Flemming's strategy. At every point where the wild horses would be most likely to make a break for their freedom, hoping to escape the encircling riders, a man, freshly mounted was waiting to turn them.

It was now Clint's job to head off the band when once again it swept toward the north. He rode leisurely to the ridge where he had waited with Flemming, and shortly came the rush of mustangs, Wolf Andrews thundering in their wake.

As Clint, shouting and waving his hat, loped toward the bunch, he saw that for the first time Copper seemed doubtful whether or not to turn. Fully a hundred feet ahead of his band the splendid stallion rushed straight toward the cowboy, his muzzle stretching out, his mane and tail waving in a breeze created by his own flying body, his hoofs seeming scarcely to touch the ground.

Clint experienced a thrill such as he'd seldom known. What a horse! Mares and colts were showing

signs of distress. But not so Copper. The stallion looked good for yet a hundred mile run.

Yelling like a Comanche, Clint sped forward to turn the superb animal, which, when scarcely a hundred feet separated the two, turned, not eastward but toward the west. Clint realized only too well that if the wild band broke through the encircling line of riders, all that he or any of the professional mustangers could do would be to tag along in the dust and watch the horses vanish.

Fortunately Clint's mount was fleet and fresh, and the cowboy rode like a Pony Express rider. For a quarter of a mile the race was nip and tuck, before Clint headed Copper, turning him southward. Where Copper led the band followed. Desperately Clint strove to swerve the wild stallion to the east. But his pony had already done its noble best and no longer could hold the terrific pace the chestnut stallion set.

As if by magic Flemming suddenly appeared ahead of the racing bunch and turned them east. Then signalling to Clint to drop out, Flemming whooped the mustangs on their second lap around the huge circle.

Again Clint changed ponies. Although he hated being compelled to work with the hard-bitten mustangers, he could no more have torn himself away from this momentous chase than he could have flown.

He could now see why Flemming, Wolf and Eddie had required the entire string of M 5 saddle horses as well as their own nags to relay the wild bunch. It

was killing work on saddle stock. What would old Jed say and do when he learned about this? Well, Clint hoped the mustangers would be gone before the old timer returned to the range camp this evening and that Copper would be tied in the corral!

While thus cogitating, the range rider had returned to his first station, and for the third time a dust cloud and the rhythmic drumming of hoofs heralded the racing mustangs. How thrilling this capturing of wild horses in comparison to working with dull and stupid cattle!

On they came, the wild bunch, Copper a full hundred yards in the lead and looking back at his harassed followers. The mares were strung out far apart, the colts lagging and faltering. One colt, trailing far behind in the dust and weaving from side to side, suddenly fell and lay still. Its mother stopped also, and although she did not fall, stood head down, feet braced wide apart. Only a few rods behind other distressed mares and colts was Flemming.

Drawing nearer and nearer to Clint the stallion lowered his majestic head, his ears flattened against his poll, and the cowboy saw the wicked gleam in his eyes. Below the flaring nostrilled muzzle were tightly clamped teeth.

The flame and roar of a Colt might turn the horse, certainly nothing else would, but Clint had no gun. Swiftly he jerked his saddle cinches tighter, spun out a loop in his rope, and spurred straight towards

the chestnut stallion. Copper's head dropped still lower. It began to swing slightly from side to side—a certain indication that the horse would kill. Clint was confronting the most terrible and dangerous antagonist imaginable.

But the rider held his ground, until that on-sweeping tornado of death was almost upon him. It was then that, with spurs and bridle, Clint fairly lifted his pony out to one side, and as he did so, the noose of his rope darted out like a living thing. Past horse and rider, so close that the bared, flashing teeth missed Clint's leg by an infinitesimal margin, shot the stallion. Believing doubtless that he had won his freedom on he sped. But Clint's rope had found its mark.

Tied fast to the saddle horn was the other end of that rope. A terrific shock as it snapped taut, and the wrenching jerk hurtled Clint's pony, braced with all of its four feet, forward fully ten feet. Into the ground the gallant little horse dug its hoofs while Copper, lunging against the rope, dragged it onward. Clint heard his saddle creak and groan. He feared it might rip apart at any moment. Past him and the straining stallion sped the wild mares, and the sobbing gasps of the breath in their flaring nostrils was like wind roaring through a canyon.

"Head 'em!" Clint yelled as Flemming reined up not far from him. But through his dust-mask Fleming's teeth were visible in a mirthless grin.

"Heck!" he shouted hoarsely. "We don't give two whoops about them worthless broomtails. You've tied onto the prize, cowboy. Stay with him!"

Never before had Clint roped anything like this battling wild horse which was tossing the cowboy's pony about much as if it were a ball on the end of a string. Had Copper turned on his foe Clint knew not what might have happened. But desperately and with all his strength, the stallion fought against that dreaded thing—a rope. He fought until the slip-noose about his neck shut off his wind. His breath came in sobbing gasps, he weaved from side to side, he fell headlong, choked down.

Unable to free his rope from his saddle horn, Clint leaped from his saddle. He ran to Copper's head, loosened the noose on the splendid neck and turned the stallion's muzzle up towards the sky.

"Better hog-tie him and leave him that way for a spell," suggested Flemming. Swinging off his own lathered mount he got his rope and dexterously tied together all four of the struggling animal's feet.

Clint released Copper's head and stood up. He was experiencing the sheer exultation of having captured not merely any wild horse, but the king of all wild horses. But as he watched Copper thrash wildly about on the ground, fighting to regain his freedom, another thought, which he had not before entertained, rushed into his mind. The tied stallion managed to rise onto his knees and remain that way for a minute, his body half-raised, and during this interval Cop-

per's eyes were following his band, disappearing into the distance. Those eyes were crowded with a great and passionate longing which stirred the chords of sympathy in cowboy Clint Dorsey.

One look at the fat-faced, beady-eyed Dave Flemming convinced the range rider that the professional horse hunter was not so moved. Flemming's only feeling seemed to be a gloating satisfaction, and although the man had not as yet declared himself, Clint was already certain he had no intention of living up to his part of the bargain. As soon as his two men arrived, the three mustangers would take Copper! Nor could Clint prevent this, unless—

In desperation he looked about him and an aspen grove a hundred yards to the west caught his attention. Aha! Someone was among those aspen. Someone whom Flemming had not yet seen, but Clint knew it was old Jed Holmes!

The afternoon shadows were lengthening when at last Eddie and Wolf appeared. They were riding their own horses and were leading Flemming's mount as well as their two pack horses. One of these men had evidently gone to the range camp to pick up the mustangers' pack outfit and they were now ready to travel. The eyes of both men shone covetously as they looked at the hog-tied stallion.

"Good work!" approved Wolf. "We'll put two ropes on his head so we can sort of lead him between two of us."

"Hold on!" flashed Clint. "According to the bargain

Copper is mine." As if to prove his claim, he sat down on the stallion's rump.

Wolf snorted. Eddie sneered and chuckled. Flemming drawled as if amused, "Forget it, cowboy. We did sort of put it over on you. But you ought to be glad we're leaving you all your ponies. You can pick 'em up on your way to camp. You'll find your guns there all okay."

An instant later Wolf was flinging out of his saddle and leaping forward. He yelled, "Hey! What you doin'? Quit it!"

But Clint paid no attention. Already he had thrown the rope from Copper's neck, and before Wolf Andrews could reach him he untied the horse's feet.

Up bounded the chestnut stallion, with Wolf jumping desperately to catch his head, and being knocked end over end. A shrill, joyous whinny. A flashing golden body. A drumming of hoofs. Copper, a free, wild horse again, was gone!

With his face twitching, Eddie the runt sat motionless on his weary nag. Wolf painfully picked himself up out of the dirt. Flemming opened his mouth to swear, and stopped. Stopped because out of the aspen grove came riding a rawhide-like old cow-puncher who held a .45 in his hand.

Said old Jed Holmes, "Since that horse has gone to the wild bunch you jaspers might as well get goin'. And don't you never come back neither!"

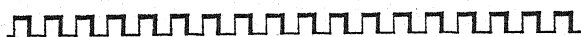
It was later by two hours. The summer sun had set, throwing upon all the rough, sage-scented rangeland the mystery of twilight, when Clint and Jed arrived at the range camp. They were leading their saddle horses, picked up here and there, and also Jed's pack horse loaded with grub.

Old Jed was speaking, "Now you've told me all about it, partner, I still don't see why, after you actually had the horse you wanted more than anything, you turned him loose. You'd caught sight of me in the grove and you knowed I'd back your hand." He shook his head.

Contentment and happiness were riding with tired Clint and his blue eyes held a strange twinkle. "Don't you savvy it, Jed? Copper has always been free. He loves the open range and its free life just as much as we do. And I'd never have felt right if 'twas me who'd taken away his freedom!"

Jed stuck out his horny hand. "Put 'er there, pard! Put 'er there!"

S T E P H E N
P A Y N E



Shaggy Lays Off

SHAGGY saddled his horse and rolled his coat in his slicker and tied the roll behind his saddle. He hitched up his sagging overalls and took notice how the folks had come from the main house, as well as the ranch hands, to see him off.

To see him off on his vacation, delayed these past five years! Not that Shaggy Eggers called it a vacation. He spoke of his long-contemplated trip to the big, busy world outside his own mountain-ringed stampin' grounds, as takin' a lay-off.

Curly, the kid, was saying, "Gosh! Wish I was in your boots, old-timer. I'd take in a couple of good shows. I'd have a bath in a real bathtub with runnin' hot water. I'd—"

Dottie, the ranch owner's daughter, broke in, "But aren't you going to dress up, Shaggy?"

"That can go till I hit town," said Shaggy, and his washed-out, wrinkle-cornered eyes were bright.

'Twas mighty nice of the folks to cluster round and wish him joy and luck. It showed that they sorta 'preciated how he'd stuck on the job as cow foreman, winter and summer, for so many years he'd lost count of 'em.

First off, there had been only Shaggy and a couple of hands, and Earl Robbins—who owned the cows and the horses and wagon, and they'd settled down right here alongside the little river in a dugout. There hadn't been a fence in all the wide sweep of valleys and flats and buttes, hogbacks and wooded foothills of this parklike basin deep in the heart of the Rockies. But Jiminy! how time and progress had run along! Too fast for a man to keep even one jump ahead of either of 'em.

Earl Robbins had been gone now a long while, and his son managed and owned V L, the cow outfit Robbins and old Shaggy together had built from scratch. The whole country was plumb settled up, growing more civilized all the time, too. Fences and houses and schools and even party telephone wires, and by gravy! the horse stage had had to give up last summer because it couldn't hold out against that new contraption called an automobile.

Shaggy figured to catch the auto stage at Rocky Point. In three hours it would whisk him to Dawson over the same road, improved now a heap over that old trail which used to take him five full days with a jag of beef steers. Sure would be an experience!

The boys were shaking his hand and giving advice,

and Mrs. Robbins, who had been a schoolma'am, but now was a rancher's wife with five likely young'uns whom Shaggy sort of uncled, came up to him and said, "Don't worry for a minute, Shaggy. Everything'll go along all right, even if you're not here. Have a good rest and change. You deserve it."

The woman turned away and Shaggy stepped up into his outmoded old saddle with a queer lump in his throat. "So long, Miz Robbins! So long, kids! You too, boys. So long! I'll kick up my heels, you bet!"

He turned out through a gate to the road and jogged along it, thinking, *A couple of weeks with nothin' to do but amuse myself. No 'sponsibility. Yet I can't help wonderin' if—*

The V L fell away behind him and the willow-lined river valley lay at his right as he rode west on a road that ran between buck-and-pole fences on a sagebrush ridge. The smell of the sage was in his nostrils, and drifting up from the valley was the lush, damp smell of wild hay. Sure was a pretty country, with those grand old mountains against the western skyline.

A benchland pasture, where cattle and a few odd horses were grazing, unrolled at Shaggy's left, and then he came to Jim Naylor's ranch buildings and he turned in through the gate, just to pass the time of day with Jim and his wife and their twin boys.

Jim had gone to work, Betty Naylor said, shooing a dozen chickens and two lazy pigs away from her door, but the boys were—



The boys had already seen Shaggy and were hailing him loudly. "Ho, Shaggy! Us fellers has got a cowhide all soaked up good and we want to make rawhide ropes, but we don't know jus' how to. You come over here a minute." Shaggy grinned and turned his stocking-legged sorrel toward the corrals and the low log stable. "Hi, Boots! Hi, Beans!" He didn't remember the real names of these ten-year-old lads with freshly scrubbed faces as alert and eager as their husky young bodies were vitally alive. "I ain't got much time, but what's your trouble?"

"How in tarnation do you get the hair off this slippery, gooey thing?" Boots asked. "And how do you cut it up in long strings after you get the hair off it? . . . Our dad said you knowed everything about cowboy stuff."



Beany nodded emphatically. "Dad says you come up the Texas trail with longhorns. Did you, Shaggy?"

"Oh, that? Sure." Shaggy shrugged his saddle-warped shoulders and swung off, a tall man and lean, with slightly bowed legs, long arms and big, calloused hands. The face above a somewhat scrawny, wind-bitten neck was lantern-jawed and hollow-cheeked and wrinkled, and the color of worn saddle leather, as was also his drooping mustache. The shaggy eyebrows were a dark gray, and they, in addition to his somewhat uncurried gray hair, had given him his nickname.

"Was it excitin'?" Boots asked eagerly. "What'd you eat on the trail?"

"Dust, mostly," drawled the old hand. "Fust off, fellers, we got to have a mighty sharp knife." He reached into one pocket of his overalls for his knife. "Then we spreads the hide out, so, and trims off the snaggy edges. Then we begins to cut, like this."

"Ourn sure ain't sharp," stated Beany. "But is yourn! Boy! . . . Was them night stampedes as wild as they say? . . . What about the hair, Shaggy?"

"Wilder, maybe. I could tell you 'bout— The hair? When we gets this cut into one long string, we stretches it. Then we goes after the hair and flesh with pieces of broken glass. You hustle some glass, Beany. . . . Uh? And maybe so you best put my horse in the barn, Boots."

Jim Naylor came home soon after sundown to find that Boots and Beany had forgotten the chores.

But Naylor couldn't be hard with his sons when they were as happy as frisky young colts, all excited because Shaggy Eggers was putting the final touches to one brand-new rawhide rope. And was it a honey!

"Now we stretches it once again," said Shaggy, "and we rubs taller into it just to beat all. You lads can do that while I helps Jim with the chores."

Pipe-smokin' time came after supper, Jim and Shaggy sitting in their sock feet yarning far into the night; yarning and talking about cattle and horses and hay and range until a tired ranch woman and two weary boys had to give up and go to bed. Yet tired as she was, Mrs. Naylor was wonderfully happy because old Shaggy had made the twins happy, and his visit was making Jim Naylor more contented with his lot. For Jim was still a young man, and he learned from the old-timer things about his business that Shaggy didn't even know that he knew himself.

Another bright day. Shaggy said resolutely, "Nope, I jus' can't stick around, Jim. I'm takin' me a lay-off, goin' to Dawson and on to Denver for a big time. . . . So long, folks! So long, kids."

He jogged along down the road, with the river valley still at his right and Rocky Point and the auto stage now only seventeen miles away. Swinging past Neighbor Halstead's place, he resolutely turned his head to the left so he wouldn't be tempted to turn in there. A feller couldn't fool around if he was figurin' to catch that stage. But a feminine voice

caught his ears, and he lifted his bridle hand, hiping around in his saddle to see two women beckoning to him.

They were at the corral, Mrs. Halstead and her daughter May, just sixteen and easy on the eyes for a country gal who never had any real swelligant clothes, the Halsteads being so dirt poor. In the corral was a yearling colt, which, even at this distance, Shaggy could see was sick or crippled.

"Shaggy," called Mrs. Halstead, "Bert's gone to Dawson for a load of grub and this yearling had to go and get into a mess of barbed wire!"

Shaggy rode into the yard and on to the corral. He tipped his nine-year-old once-gray hat and climbed over the fence. "Good gravy! He sure did snag himself plenty. . . . The wild li'le critter ain't halter broke and you can't get up to him."

"That's the trouble," said May. "I was going to rope him, but I know he'll fight like the dickens, lose a lot of blood and—"

"Give me my saddle rope," said Shaggy. "This cayuse won't open his cuts much, once I get hands on him."

He took his lariat, dropped its loop around the wild and frightened yearling's neck.

Then, as the animal struggled, Shaggy went down along the taut rope until he got one hand on the colt's ear, the other on its lower jaw. A twist of its head and it was down.

"Now then, Miz Halstead, if you'll wash out them cuts while I hold 'm—"

But Mrs. Halstead had turned sick, for she was new to the West and its rough-and-ready surgery. So Shaggy hog-tied the colt, and with May's help he cleaned the wounds, took stitches in four of them, dusted them all with air-slacked lime and finally turned the animal loose.

"Dinner's ready, Shaggy," Mrs. Halstead called from the house.

"Good gravy! Is it dinner time a'ready? Well, I sure can take on a feed."

The meal over, Shaggy hacked up a little firewood for the women folks. While doing this, he was thinking of something patient Mrs. Halstead had said, and of much more she had left unsaid. She had said her husband had been gone now four days and should have been home last night. She had not said that she was scared stiff, although Shaggy could guess this from her anxious face, and from May's, too, that Bert had blown in his grub money, just as he had done the last time he'd gone to Dawson, and would come home without any grub at all.

Shaggy said good-by and let his horse amble along leisurely toward Rocky Point. With no stage until tomorrow morning, no use now in hurrying. Presently he met Bert Halstead with his wagon rocking along behind his sorry team as if it was pretty light. Bert looked kind of flushed, acted kind of embarrassed,

and after they had chin-wagged for a few minutes he blurted, "I'd rather take a lickin' than go home and face the missus and May! Gosh! To think I'm such a doggoned sucker!"

Shaggy scowled. He wanted to give the man a tongue-blistering, but old Shaggy himself had done plenty things in his younger days—and even more recently—of which he wasn't proud. Maybeso a a helpin' hand right now would sort of put Bert on his feet. You never could tell. Anyhow, Shaggy had Robbins' check for three hundred dollars in his pocket, and he wouldn't need all that dough for one spree.

Halstead was going on, "I blew in my money. I couldn't get credit in Dawson or in Rocky Point, so here I am, goin' home with an empty wagon."

"Shuckins, I know how 'tis. Turn around, Bert. We'll go back to town."

This time Shaggy got all the way to Rocky Point, and later in the day he watched Bert Halstead pull out for home with a hundred dollars' worth of grub in his wagon. Shaggy paid the bill, saying, "Forget it, Bert, till someday when you're flush."

Restless and dissatisfied, Shaggy shuffled around the little town for an hour.

The stocking-legged sorrel had carried him out of Rocky Point and a couple of miles along the road when Shaggy observed a corral at the Kessler ranch half-filled with mustangs. A couple of very youthful

cowboys were wrestling one of those broncs in another corral.

Shaggy's washed-out blue eyes lighted when he turned that way. "Hello, kids. What you doin'?" One look told him that these boys, Kessler's son and another lad who seemed altogether green, didn't know what they were trying to do.

"Breaking a bronc," Bud Kessler said and then with his eyes widening, "Whoopee! Shaggy Eggers! Say, you savvy this business. . . . This feller here is Al Brown, a friend of mine from 'way back East. I was goin' to show him how we ride wild horses and tame 'em. But how am I going to get a saddle on this critter?"

As if drawn by a magnet, Shaggy entered the corral and eyed an undersized bronc which was full of snorts. The boys had it all of a lather from trying to rope it. But they had not been successful, and the horse was now rolling the whites of its eyes and keeping as far away as possible.

Shaggy picked up the boy's rope. "Now stay in the center of the corral, you fellers, and be ready to give me a hand, pronto."

Shaggy didn't go to McCook's ranch that night. Kessler and his hired men, coming in from work, found the old hand and the two boys in the corral, with Shaggy riding a bronc.

"We broke four of 'em this afternoon, dad," Bud

cried joyfully. "At least we rode 'em, and that's a start toward breaking 'em."

"How much of it did you do?" Kessler asked.

"Well, I did stay on top of the two I rode. . . . Now Shaggy's showed us how to handle 'em, me and Al can break this whole bunch for you, Dad."

Kessler laughed. "Will my kid ever make a bronc buster, Shaggy?"

"Sure. He's got grit. Grit, plus a little know-how, is all it takes. They even say the less brains a feller has, the better. . . . By gravy! I ain't had so much fun in years."

"I never did have so much fun," declared Al.

Before bedtime that night Kessler said off-handedly, "My stock's all out on the Alkali Flats range, and I'll have to roundup before I can brand my calves. . . . I suppose the V L's keepin' you busy?"

"It always has," Shaggy replied with a chuckle. "But at last I've got a layoff. I'm a-goin' to—"

"That's jim dandy! Then you can help me brand!"

"But I'm goin' to Dawson and then to Denver."

"On business, Shaggy?"

"Wal, no. It's—"

"Then another day won't make much difference to your plans, will it?"

"I reckon not."

It took two full days to roundup Kessler's stock and get his ninety-odd calves branded. Shaggy Eggers never worked harder that he could remember.

The morning after the job was finished, Shaggy pointed his horse's nose definitely for Rocky Point. He hoped the stores would be open before the stage pulled out, for his shirt and underclothes were so soggy with sweat and so grimed with other stains, mostly plain corral dust, that he must buy new ones. He needed a shave right bad too. Looked worser'n a bum, he did.

Midway between Kessler's and town he met an old acquaintance, Ben Arp, horse trader.

Arp ran his shrewd eyes over the sorrel. "How'll you swap for this hoss I'm ridin', Shaggy?"

"Now get along with you, Ben. I'm headin' to town, and in a hurry, too."

"Yeah? Scarit that I'd slicker you, huh? Got no confidence that you can outsmart me in a hoss trade!"

Shaggy bristled. "Who says you can slicker me! Swap for that crowbait you're forkin'? Sa-ay, I wouldn't trade one stockin' leg of my Blaze for that long-toothed, knock-kneed, swivel-hipped plug if you'd throw in your saddle t' boot."

Ben Arp chuckled and then he roared, "Boot! I was figurin' on gettin' boot, not givin' it. . . . Uckool! The more I size up your sorrel the less I like him. Looks wind-broke to me. I'll bet he can't run a quarter mile without roarin' like a bellows!"

"That's plenty outa you, Ben. If it's a horse race you're wantin', tell you what I'll do. . . ."

The morning sun climbed higher and higher. En-

tirely forgotten by Shaggy, Cass Grimes' auto stage rolled out of Rocky Point. The two men sat sideways in their saddles and argued; they dismounted and sat in the sagebrush and chewed stems of the weed, and mosquitoes and gnats swarmed around them, finding them easy prey.

Finally they traded, Shaggy pocketing twenty-five dollars.

Arp, looking smug and foxy, rode away on the sorrel and Shaggy tipped his hat over his eyes and combed his back hair with his stubby fingers, suddenly aware that the day was far gone. Might as well have that gabfest with George McCook and catch the stage tomorrow morning.

McCook shouted. "Why, you longhorn son of a Piute! Long time no see. What you doin' right now?"

"Nothing," said Shaggy, grinning joyfully. "I'm a-layin' off. I was figgerin' to—"

"Stop figurin'. You've got a job with me!"

"Nope! Now you listen—"

"You listen, old mossyhorn. I've got a thousand two-year-old steers I've sold and got to deliver to a feller in the Bunch Grass country, and I've got to hit the trail with 'em right now. I thought I had a full crew, but I haven't, and you know what these alfalfa and corn-fed punchers we get now'days are. Plenty willin' they are, but no savvy what it's all about."

"But, George, I jus' can't!" Shaggy's face and eyes were beginning to take on an eager glow.

"Steady, old scout. I've got a good chuck-wagon

cook, a horse wrangler and plenty saddle horses. We'll be handlin' steers, easiest critters there is to handle, and nighthawkin' all the way 'long the trail. Gettin' our grub at the wagon, sleepin' under the stars—just like old times, Shaggy."

"Like old times! Wal, now I—When do we start?"

Shaggy's singing voice wasn't a lusty baritone, nevertheless he sang:

*"Stray in the herd and the boss said kill it,
So I shot 'im in the rump with a
long-handled skillet.
Sing a ti-yi-yippee-oopie aal!"*

as he rode in the swing of the trail herd. This was the life!

Shaggy had six days of it and lived every minute to the limit. Then the young steers were turned over to the buyer and Shaggy woke up to remember suddenly that he was due, mighty soon, back at his old stamping ground, the V L. On his new roan horse, he headed back.

Just as the supper bell was ringing, he turned in at the V L on the evening of the thirteenth day of his lay-off. The boys, stringing out from the bunkhouse in answer to that summons, paused an instant before they surged in a body over to the stable to greet Shaggy.

"Where's that new suit of clothes?" Curly demanded.

"My gawsh!" gasped Lanky Evans. "He ain't

shaved since he left! I don't think he's changed his shirt neither."

"Where you pick up the roan horse?" Price Givens inquired with great curiosity.

"Swapped for 'im," said Shaggy. "And is he a dinger! . . . Say, them spring weaners in the Kuster Draw pasture doin' okay?"

"Sure they are," said Lanky. "You think they'd get snake bit if you wasn't ridin' herd on 'em?"

"Lost any from poison weed on Jimson Flats, boys?"

"Nopel! But we want to get the low-down on your—"

"Never mind me! 'Id you young bucks get that rock salt scattered in Moose Basin like I told you?"

"You bet. . . . But how was Denver, Shaggy?"

New arrivals materialized, Mrs. Robbins and Dottie, and behind them Earl Robbins, the boss himself, and the smaller children.

"Yes, how was Denver?" Dottie echoed.

"Well, I—" Shaggy began. "Let's eat and talk later."

"Yes, let's eat," agreed Robbins dryly. "And be careful what you say later, Shaggy. Remember, there's a party-telephone line."

"Huh? I had kinda forgotten that." Shaggy felt definitely uncomfortable. That dratted telephone! The V L ranch darned well knew he hadn't been to Denver—or even to Dawson. Good gravy! They must know too that he'd been—

"I'm rarin' to get back in the collar," he declared.

"Back in the collar, eh?" repeated Robbins, his eyes twinkling in his serious face. "Shaggy, you ever hear of a postman's vacation?"

"No, sir," said Shaggy, picking his saddle off the roan to carry it into the barn. "Postmen get vacations too, uh? Well, I sure hope they enjoy their lay-offs like I did mine."

As the dark, cool interior of the stable swallowed him, Shaggy heard Dottie say to Curly, "Curly, aren't old men queer? We know he never took in even one show or a dance. Not even one dance."

"Not even one dance!" Curly echoed. "He don't know what fun is."

"Shuckins," muttered Shaggy. "A lot you know about it. By gravy! I had the best time of my life! . . . Wonder what Earl Robbins was gettin' at—'postman's vacation'? I'll ask him sometime."

S T E P H E N
P A Y N E



The Lost Dudettes

JUNE settled the borrowed Stetson hat on her flyaway brown curls and said to her reflection in the wavy old mirror, "At last I look as much like a dude wrangler as any of the ones Dad Holmes has on the Heart Bar!"

While she saddled her buckskin pony, her blue eyes were brighter than ever with determination. Her lips were set in as straight a line as their red curves allowed. For June Knight had set her heart upon becoming a dude wrangler.

She was sure that the Heart Bar Dude Ranch needed a girl wrangler as much as she needed money to help out with things at home on the Knights' small ranch. There was, however, another spur to June's ambitions. She was determined to show Jed Holmes that she was just as skillful as he was in "wrangling dudes."

Before the season had begun, she had asked Jed to say a good word for her to his father, who owned

the Heart Bar. To her surprise, Jed had turned her down, and she had not forgotten how he had squelched her.

"Heck! Whoever heard of a girl wrangling dudes? It's no job for you, even if you can ride. Dudes and dudettes have to have lots of attention—the kind a man can give 'em!"

June had fired up at this, reminding Jed of some of his own past blunders. "I doubt if guests would be any too safe with you, Jed Holmes. You're so crazy about fishing, that when your mind's on trout you forget everything else. I remember—"

Jed had snapped back at her, and this had led to an open break which June found herself deeply regretting. Now she had decided to go over his head and ask Dad Holmes to give her a trial.

"If only he will!" she thought as she rode into the yard at the Heart Bar ranch. It was a lovely place, cupped in a green valley circled by piney hills, with great blue-green mountains towering on the skyline. In winter those mountains were silvery, frosted cakes, lying under the sky, and sunrise and sunset painted the frosting rose and pink and gold and violet.

June loved the mountains, and their beauty made her feel achy inside. But this morning she was thinking of what she would say to Dad Holmes. "I'll tell him that I know all the trails, and which gulches you can climb down, and which you can't, and all the prettiest places for rides and picnics besides—the

kind of picture-card places that dudettes and people from the East like, and—”

The next words were lost in her consternation and surprise. “Why, it looks as if nobody were at home!” Her heart dropped into the toes of her scuffed little riding boots.

But when she circled the lodge to the kitchen entrance, she found old Pete Kane, the man cook.

“Where’s everybody today, Pete?”

Pete, who had always been her friend, grinned at her concerned face. “You mean everybody, Junie, or just the boy?”

June flushed and replied: “I don’t want to see Jed! Where are those four pretty dudettes I liked?”

“Gone to Lost Park. Jed got ’em a-going early, account of it being so far. He was hustling around that lively he forgot the lunch. But he took enough time to hunt up his fishing outfit, don’t you worry.”

“Isn’t Dad Holmes here?” June asked eagerly.

“Dad and Mrs. Holmes went to town to meet some new guests.”

“Oh!” June choked on her terrible disappointment. She couldn’t ask Mr. Holmes for that job today.

Old Pete squinted at her thoughtfully. “You sound sort of down, Junie. You know them four dudettes with Jed? They’re mighty nice gals, and they’re going to be powerful hungry. Jed figured to have them eat in Lost Park.”

“Talk about a broad hint!” laughed June. “Well, bring out the lunch, you old schemer. I was thinking



of going to my cave in Columbine Gulch. Instead, I'll ride to Lost Park!"

It was long after noon when June reached Lost Park, an open, grassy spot with a pretty lake bordering its west rim. She expected to find Jed and the Heart Bar guests here, but to her surprise there was no one in sight. Only echoes from a rocky cliff across the lake answered her calls.

Tired and hungry herself, June followed the lake shore to the outlet. Then, seeing hoof marks of a single horse, she rode down along the stream until she discovered Jed's saddle horse tied to a willow. To anyone knowing Jed, this meant that he was fishing!

Calling and shouting again and again, June rode for half a mile before she saw Jed hurrying out of the willows. He was carrying his rod and a forked willow loaded with brook trout.

"Wh—Why hello, June! You here? Hi, what time is it? I can't see the sun for the clouds."

"It must be three o'clock," June answered. "Jed, where are those dudettes?"

Jed pointed. "Back yonder in the park."

"But they aren't!"

"Go on. You're kidding me."

June flushed. "I'm not kidding," she said sharply. Since her misunderstanding with the young cowboy, she had not felt in the least like kidding with him. "Ride behind my saddle till we pick up your horse."

Really alarmed now, Jed obeyed. After reaching his own horse, he hurried even faster, and soon found that June had told the truth.

"Well, doggone, where have those girls gone?" he fussed. "That's the trouble with these Eastern dudes. You've got to keep an eye on them every minute."

June could not let this opportunity pass. "And that's something you didn't do! A girl wrangler would take a lot better care of the guests in her charge."

"Aw, rub it in," snorted Jed. "Have a heart, June! I expected them to stay right here at the lake. They were tired, So I figured I'd have half an hour to hook a mess of fish."

"Did you tell the girls you were going fishing?"

"Well—No, I didn't. You—you think maybe they're lost?"

June looked up at the storm clouds, which had grown darker. "Almost anybody not used to the mountains would get scared and try to go home—

and then get turned around and lost. We must find them, Jed."

Searching the park, the two soon found horse tracks leading north into the rough country.

"They're sure enough lost," Jed gloomed, "and my fault. Dad'll lose four good guests, because his wrangler fell down on the job. If only they'd had sense enough to let their horses pick the trail!"

"They wouldn't think of that," said June. "Hello! Horses yonder!"

"Four!" added Jed. "But they're a mile away."

"Yes," said June, "and they're carrying empty saddles. They're cutting across the high country."

Jed's face was tight with concern. "Where are the dudettes? June, will you hunt for them while I go after their horses?"

"All right, Jed. They'll never get home without horses. Wait a second, while we decide where to meet."

"Meet you?" asked the dismayed and provoked wrangler. "I don't know that I can catch the horses before the storm. And there's no telling where you'll find the dudettes. Is this a mess!"

June's serious eyes searched the horizons, hoping against hope that she might see the four girls. She said: "If I can, I'll get the dudettes to my cave in Columbine Gulch. If that doesn't work out, I'll get them home somehow."

The last she saw of Jed, he was dashing after the riderless horses, which had broken into a gallop.

There seemed no chance of his overtaking them. So it was up to June to find the lost girls!

Eventually she came to where the four, still riding their horses, had swung to the left down a deep canyon on the eastern slope of the range. A half mile farther along, she saw that the party had stopped. Here the ranch girl read signs that revealed how the confused, lost dudettes had dismounted and attempted to drive the horses ahead of them down an almost impassable gulch. It was then that the horses had turned back and skipped out!

June imagined the ponies laughing and kicking up their heels in glee.

It was then that June's task became difficult beyond her expectations. Where had the girls gone from there? She did some tracking worthy of an Apache scout, and learned that the dudettes had gone down the canyon. And what a time they had had getting through and over the rocks and down timber.

Full dark had come, and drizzling rain was falling when June overtook them at a windfall that they could not pass. They were stalled, baffled. They were tired, hungry, and cross, and they were frightened!

For the first time, June saw how terrifying it was for anyone unused to the West and the mountains to be left on his own, without a guide.

They clamored to greet her with cries of relief. All together they demanded: "Where's our wrangler?"

Why did he leave us flat to get home as best we could?"

For a few minutes June was busy, offering alibis for Jed in addition to comforting and reassuring the forlorn duettes. "You needn't worry about wild animals attacking you," she told them. "I'll have you safe out of this canyon in no time at all."

One girl wailed: "But we can't go on. This dreadful place is blocked with rocks and trees and water and everything. And in the dark we can't go back the way we took to come here."

June said: "No, we can't go back. But we can't go ahead either. What we'll do is climb out and up onto the ridge. There we'll find good going."

She took her lariat from her saddle. "Each of you get hold of this rope," she directed. "I'll ride ahead with the rope around my saddle horn, and that way I can almost pull you up the slope. Come on, be game and trust me!"

Making light of the ordeal that confronted them, June got the party up onto the ridge. There she gave her horse to the two duettes who seemed most exhausted, and, on foot with the other two, she led the way along the ridge and into another gulch farther to the south.

At last she reached her cave. Though how she ever did all this in the darkness and the rain, June never exactly knew.

They entered the haven of the cave just before

the heavens opened and stinging hail fell in sheets. June's pony had to hump his back and take it. But inside June's cave, the guests were safe. Even the lunch that June had brought from the Heart Bar and the trout that Jed had caught were not hurt.

The tired dudettes were of little help to June. But she had wonderful fun in taking care of them. For the time being she was a dude wrangler!

With dry wood that had been stored in her cave, June built a fire so small that the smoke would not be too annoying. Then she broiled the trout on hot coals and spread out the lunch.

Thermos bottles of coffee had been included, and there was enough extra salt—put in for hard-boiled eggs—to salt the fish. Every one of the dudettes said that she had never enjoyed any meal so much!

June said practically, "I reckon you never needed one quite so badly."

Troubled about the report that she feared Dad Holmes would get about Jed, she went on: "Just think! Getting lost will give you something exciting to write home about!"

"It's thrilling," declared the youngest girl, a flashing-eyed brunette. "I wouldn't have missed it for love or money. But what would have happened if an experienced wrangler like you, June, hadn't come and found us?"

"Experienced wrangler!" June smiled in the shadowy light of the fire. "Get your clothes as dry as you can," she said. "You'll have to sleep in them!"

The morning sun had melted the hailstones, and a damp mist was rising out of the gulch when Dad Holmes and Jed arrived, leading four extra horses. When they saw the lost dudettes laughing and talking around a bright fire at the mouth of June's cave, Dad Holmes stammered, "I—uh—I wouldn't have had this happen for—"

"Oh, forget it!" laughed the brunette. "I'd love to be lost all over again—if June would come to the rescue."

"Well, well! About Jed's leaving you—he didn't mean—"

"It was our fault, Mr. Holmes," said the oldest dudette. "June has shown us that we should have stayed where we were and waited for the wrangler!"

In her relief, June could have kissed the girl. She had worried more about poor Jed's being in Dutch than about anything else. She looked up suddenly and found Jed beside her, looking very contrite. His voice stumbled as he said in an undertone: "June, I can't ever thank you for all you did. But I've told dad—"

Dad Holmes boomed: "He told me that we must have a girl dude wrangler on the Heart Bar. June, you're on! Does that suit my guests?"

June was suddenly terribly embarrassed when the four girls congratulated her, and embraced her, one after the other. She was so thrilled and excited and pleased that she could not speak, but when her bright eyes sought Jed's, his answering look told her that he was every bit as pleased and as proud as she!

S T E P H E N
P A Y N E



“Hook ’Im, Cow!”

CLINT STEELE, sitting cross-legged on the ground, a tin plate filled with food in his lap and a cup of coffee by his side, forgot to swallow a mouthful of beefsteak as foreman Art Banks announced:

“Well, waddies, I got to flag my kite for the home ranch to-night. I’ll meet yuh to-morrow evenin’ at Wild Cat Draw.”

He hesitated a moment, his eyes roving over a dozen dusty punchers scattered about in the vicinity of the round-up campfire, all engaged in the same pleasant occupation as Clint Steele, the youngest rannie on the pay-roll of the Frying Pan outfit.

“Blaze, yuh can take charge for to-morrow; string the boys out an’ all. Bunch at Wild Cat Draw, o’ course.” The foreman’s eyes rested on a short, heavy-bodied man with a half inch of blackstubble covering his thick, gross face.

“Uh-huh, got yuh,” grunted Blaze Bain, and his

mean little beady eyes lifted to search out Clint Steele with a sort of gloating triumph in their depths.

"So-long," said the foreman and swung onto his horse. The animal's hoofs rang loud in the distant silence, for, like Clint, the rest of the Frying Pan waddies had for the moment ceased eating. Clint was aware that their glances were meeting and that some of them were scowling, and he swallowed unchewed his mouthful of steak.

Blaze Bain, bully and bulldozer, was the most unpopular rider in the Frying Pan outfit, and Clint was his chosen victim for all manner of petty torments and gibes. Clint was only eighteen, small for his age, and, although wiry and agile, what chance had he against a two-hundred-pounder, whom not a man of the outfit could handle, either in boxing or wrestling?

Yet Blaze had been made boss of the round-up for one day! Art Banks could have given somebody else the responsibility, Clint thought bitterly. Surely he knew it would be gall and wormwood to all the punchers to have to take orders from Blaze, if only for a day. Still, perhaps Banks dared not do otherwise in this emergency, for Blaze Bain was some sort of a relative of the big boss, the owner himself. Yes, that was the reason for the foreman's telling him to take charge. Come to think of it, Art Banks had wanted more than once to fire the lazy bulldozing fellow who made sores on the back of every pony he rode, but had either lacked the authority to do so or was afraid of the consequences.

Well, it was not Clint's place to criticise or condemn Banks. The thing that troubled the kid the most and made him angry and sick at heart, even as Blaze Bain's eyes, plainly triumphant, met his, was that Bain in authority could do what Bain as a puncher had been unable to do. He could take from the kid's string Nubbins, the little bay pony that was Clint's pride and pet.

Ever since the first day of the round-up, when the "strings" (each rider's quota of ponies) had been apportioned by the foreman, Blaze Bain had coveted Nubbins. Persistently he had tried to trade Clint his choice of any pony in his own string for the little bay. Failing in this, Blaze had done his best to persuade Banks to give him Nubbins.

But Banks, although giving in to Blaze in some other instances, had stood firm by the ethics of the range. A rider's string was his so long as the rider stayed with the outfit, unless there should be a reapportionment of ponies all 'round. The rider could make trades with other riders working for the same brand, if he so wished, or he could lend a horse to a friend; but no other rider could take a horse from that rider's string without permission. Yes, the foreman could, if he deemed it necessary, make changes; nevertheless it was unethical to do so, and always resulted in trouble and hard feelings. Banks would not let Blaze Bain have Nubbins.

But now that Banks was gone and Blaze in supreme authority, no question of ethics would trouble him



for a second. Small wonder that Clint, who loved Nubbins and hated to see the abuse Blaze showered on every pony he rode, was troubled.

The kid rose, took his utensils to the dish-pan on the table behind the cook's tail-end cupboard fitted into the wagon-box. Muggy was washing the dishes. The night wrangler was drying them. In the valley a hundred yards below the camp the horse cavvy grazed unguarded. Later the night wrangler would swing onto his pony, standing near-by with bridle-reins down, and go to the cavvy for his night vigil.

The sound from their many bells of many tones, tinkling through the mellow twilight, was sweet music to Clint's ears.

The camp-fire, no longer being used by Muggy, burned bright, its wood fuel crackling joyously. Beside it four waddies were gambling with a top improvised from a spool squared at its upper edges and marked alternately P, T, A and N on the four edges so squared. Each player in turn spun the top. If it fell with the P uppermost, the player put in a dime; if T, he took out one dime; if the N showed, he got nothing, the pot remaining the same; but if A came uppermost he took the entire pot. Then all the players contributed toward a new one.

On the canvas tarpaulin of an unrolled bed, other punchers were playing cards by the light of a lantern with a smoky chimney. It was not quite dark enough for this yet, but they had it ready. Still other waddies were crawling between the blankets of their beds, which were scattered promiscuously about on the open ground. These early-to-bed riders would be roused for the midnight and later night-herding shifts. Their saddled horses, secured by picket ropes, were near at hand.

A quarter mile away on a flat hilltop was the day herd, now bedded for the night—five hundred or more cattle, the cut that had been gathered on this round-up. The silhouetted guards at the outer edges of the dark mass were discernible. They lolled in their saddles or moved leisurely, and the faint glow of

their cigarettes could be seen in the gathering darkness. Wafted to Clint near the wagon came disconnected snatches of a dozen songs, old and new.

From afar a lone coyote yipped raucously; another answered in a more mournful tone. Both sounds died away and the sharp calls of unseen night-hawks could be heard as they winged across the sky, where myriads of stars were just winking into view, while in the sage-brush little, night-prowling animals scurried about. Cool night air scented with sage enveloped the land, which was big and wide, unfenced and free.

"There's somethin' most awful nice 'bout bein' on the round-up," thought Clint sadly. "Oh, when the weather's good, what a life! I hate terrible to quit, but—" He shrugged and watched Blaze Bain "horn-ing in" on the card game on the bed. And he grinned, but not happily, as he observed how Runnin'-Iron Pete and Tip Hankins promptly decided they had business elsewhere.

Across the silence to Clint's ears came Blaze Bain's words, gruff and challenging:

"Your bet, yuh slab-shouldered walloper."

He was addressing feeble old Dan Roberts, who sometimes had to be helped onto his horse of a right frosty morning, and Clint pressed his flaming face against the cold iron of a wagon tire. "That fella jus' don't belong," he whispered.

Then he went to bed and had a nightmare from which he was awakened by Latigo Bill at two A.M.,

to stand his two hours' guard. When he came in at four, dawn's faint light was creeping across the great brown hills, and the night wrangler was bringing the cavvy, bells a-jangle, to the rope corral, while Muggy was busy over a glowing fire, and dim human shapes were pulling on their boots and chaps at the edges of their beds.

Clint off-saddled near the open space in front of the crowding ponies, where the wrangler acted both as gate and fence. A seemingly lazy, indifferent fence; but the loop of his rope hung open in his right hand, and if a horse bolted out past him that horse was apt to come to grief.

Blaze Bain, squat and arrogant, swaggered to the cavvy, trailing a ten-foot loop from his forty-foot rawhide. Clint, rope in hand, sought Nubbins' bay head among the many, faint in the dim light. Running-Iron Pete and Tip Hankins found their circle horses sooner than he saw Nubbins. Tip's rope sped its full length across the backs and heads, to land true around the neck of a small blue roan. The ponies parted to let the roped horse through. Running Iron snared his mount from a distance of ten feet and chuckled at his easy catch.

"Kid," spoke Blaze Bain. "Yuh'll straddle old Chief today." His rawhide hissed through the air and Clint saw the loop float over the head of Nubbins, to be jerked taut with needless viciousness.

"Chief ain't one o' my string," said Clint. "Yuh can

take your rope off Nubbins. I'm able to noose my own hoss."

Running-Iron Pete and Tip Hankins, leading their ponies away, stopped dead still and turned. It had come! The kid of the outfit had told bulldozing Blaze Bain "where to head in at."

"Noose him then!" Bain's words boomed in the silence. "I told yuh to take Chief."

"And I told you—" Clint's voice was high-pitched and shrill.

"Yuh don't tell me nothin'!" Blaze flared. "Who the thunder d'yuh think yuh are? I'm boss, and you an' me's traded hosses. Savvy the burro? Rope Chief or get away from here. I'm forkin' yore li'l pet. Huh! Time he was rid' by a man."

He led Nubbins aside, and other riders coming to the cavy stopped, drawing together. This act was unprecedented, a breach of range etiquette not to be condoned; but what could they do about it? Plainly it was up to the wronged party, Clint Steele. Well, Clint couldn't lick Blaze. A fight would be a farce or a butchery, and would settle nothing, for Blaze was boss. But the punchers had only a moment in which to debate the matter.

Clint dropped his rope and charged the big fellow like a terrier rushing a mastiff, and Blaze drew his gun, aimed at Clint's feet and pulled the trigger.

But the hammer clicked hollowly, to the tremendous relief of the watchers, who remembered that

Blaze was out of shells because his six-shooter was a Thirty-eight on a Forty-five frame, while theirs were Forty-fives. Clint had no gun. Drawing was certainly a cowardly trick on Bain's part. They were mighty glad his gun had tricked him.

Clint hit the boss in the stomach. Bain grunted, giving ground, but not falling. Dropping his weapon, he caught Clint's legs, one in each hand, stood the kid on his head and shook him. Then, as if Clint were a stick of wood, he swung him about his head and threw him aside.

The onlookers gasped and Clint staggered to his feet yards away. He was badly shaken, but not seriously hurt. However, reason overcame rashness and he did not renew the unequal encounter.

"Anybody else feel lucky?" Blaze challenged, retrieving his useless gun. "How 'bout yuh, Runnin'-Iron?"

Running-Iron had tackled Blaze once with disastrous results to himself.

"If I ever wade into you again, it'll be with a club," he retorted.

"Uh-huh. Two can play at that, too. Saddle up. Fun's over. Kid, are yuh quittin'?"

"Naw. You can throw me 'round like I was a rope, but you can't make me quit!" Clint picked up his hat and the small treasures that had fallen from his pockets.

"Yuh'll ride the hoss I tell yuh to, then. An' yuh don't get this Nubbins hoss back, neither. Savvy?"

"Maybe I will, when Art Banks gets back."

"Say, if yuh squawk tuh him, I'll break yuh in two. Here, yuh dog-goned sissified cayuse, don't yuh know 'nough tuh stand still?" Nubbins had shied away from Blaze. He threw a half hitch about the pony's nose and yanked him violently several times, then kicked him in the belly.

"I'll larn yuh! Yore eddication's begun!" Blaze roared.

Tears of rage stood in Clint's eyes. Seething but helpless, he roped old chief, a tall horse that had been waterfounded and was as stiff as a poker. He had a sore back which Blaze had neglected to treat, and cinch galls. Clint felt sorry for the old horse. He really shouldn't be in the cavvy anyway, but Art Banks hadn't picked a choice string for Blaze Bain.

The punchers saddled in silence, and then ate their breakfast. They generally did this before roping circle horses, but the new boss had reversed the order. Clint swallowed a cup of coffee, but had no appetite for the golden brown biscuits, fresh and hot in a great Dutch oven, nor for the sizzling beefsteak.

The night wrangler was harnessing Muggy's four horses and hitching them to the chuck-wagon. Muggy systematically shoved articles into his cupboard and washed the dishes as fast as the punchers brought them to him. Five minutes after the meal was finished, he was loading the rolled beds as the wrangler tossed them to him. Then, taking his four lines from the brake, he was off at a swinging trot, northward

across the sage-brush, following no road at all. Behind the wagon the horse cavvy fell into line like trained soldiers, the day wrangler bringing up the rear.

A mile away in the open country the day herd, in charge of three men, crawled northward at a snail's pace, the animals grazing as they moved.

Meanwhile the punchers had mounted and Bain had "strung them out on circle." The orders were simple. So-and-so was to take such-and-such men and work such-and-such part of the territory to be rounded-up that day. His last order was:

"Clint, yuh come with me."

Blaze had been watching the kid closely since their fight, probably to see that Clint did not get a gun from some other waddie; and now as they rode away together, the boss tersely gave his reason for having Clint accompany him.

"I knows yuh sets a heap o' store by this little hoss, an' I jus' wants yuh to sweat and froth at the mouth while yuh watches me handle him proper an' I'arn him somethin'."

And Nubbins' education did begin. His gait didn't suit Blaze, who yanked him right and left with his heavy spade bit and then took down a double length of rope and proceeded to "work the blasted pet over." Nubbins, used to kindness and complete accord between himself and his rider, was bewildered by this abuse, but presently his usually kind bright eyes began to smolder. If a horse can reason, Nubbins was

doing it. Certainly some thought process was taking place which boded no good to the brute on the pony's back.

As for Clint, his lips drew to a bloodless white line, but he said no word; and so they loped across a world of green and grey and brown, with the morning sunlight painting the western range dun, saffron and orange which blended rainbow hues into the blue of the pines, all bewitchingly beautiful.

Before this morning, Clint had loved to see that morning sun transform the world times without number, had loved to see the frost and dew dry from the willows and sage and grass; but he'd no eye for beauty this day. The world was dark, unwholesome, unhappy and terribly cruel.

They loped up a great mesa toward the mountains, with old Chief hard pressed to hold the pace. Nubbins, light of foot and fleet, ran easily; but the sweat came out on him and dried, and came again, while Chief panted and wheezed. They reached the foot of the range on their east and dropped from the mesa into a brushy valley.

"Whoop the dogies down this," said Blaze. "Some other cow-crammers has got the territory to our right."

Knowing the lay of the land, Clint knew this without being told. Running-Iron Pete, Tip Hankins and old Dan Roberts had Pingree Hill and Pot-Luck Flats to work. Clint could see Running-Iron on top of Pingree Hill now. They had come by an easier route

than Blaze had chosen, holding to lower ground, and consequently had reached the outer limit of their circle ahead of Clint and Blaze.

Cattle jumped up ahead of these two as they rode down the valley with Blaze yelling like a Comanche. Two miles, three, they rode with the herd ahead of them constantly growing larger, when in a thick patch of buck-brush they came upon a young calf lying prone, nose to the ground, unheeding the noise and tumult about it.

It had been hidden by its mother, and with the instincts of its species would not move until its mother came back to it, unless attacked by a coyote or otherwise disturbed. Cattle, alarmed by the yells of Blaze and of Running-Iron Pete, were crashing down through the brush on the hillside at Clint's and the boss's right and a little way behind them. Cows were bawling for their calves.

Blaze rode to the prone calf, slapped at it with his rope. "Hil H'ist yer tail an' git, yuh little devil!"

No movement from the calf. Nubbins shied away as Blaze attempted to force him to step on the little thing. Blaze thereupon gave him another brief working-over and a thorough cussing, then forced the quivering pony to the calf again. Clint had stopped dead still, his face chalky under its dust mask. Blaze bent far from his saddle to grasp the calf's tail, and in that instant Nubbins acted.

Leaping sidewise, cat-quick, he landed pitching. A hoarse bugle of rage sounded as he cut loose with

all his pent-up fury asserting itself against this man.

Three terrific jumps, with the pony's head buried somewhere beneath its front legs, and Blaze Bain was thrown against the immobile calf. Nubbins, as though he knew exactly what he was about, kicked the falling rider with both hind feet as he landed, and then he threw up his head, snorted triumphantly like a full-fledged mustang, and shot down the valley, tail waving and hoofs apparently scorning the ground.

Clint urged Chief after him for two jumps and stopped. Tingling waves of delight coursed through the kid. He'd never in all his life seen anything which he had so thoroughly and heartily enjoyed.

But the calf was immobile no longer, for, as the man bumped it, it had leaped to its feet, emitting the startled "Blah" of alarm, the signal at sound of which its mother or any other cow within hearing would come charging pell-mell, knowing that danger threatened. And out of the brush at Blaze Bain's right came not only this calf's mother, but six other long-horned, wild-eyed mother cows. They came bawling and they came fast.

Clint was six rods away on a slow horse. Blaze, scrambling to his feet, saw the cows—heads low, tails up—bearing down on him. Mother love and the need of protecting their offspring was driving away all fear, even of a human being. In terror Blaze yelled unavailingly.

"Bla-a-h! Bla-a-h!" shrilled the calf in its high-

pitched young voice. "Bra-a-w!" rang the cows' answer.

Blaze drew out his gun, remembered something, turned and fled ignominiously; and the startled calf, crazily unreasoning, fled after him. And after man and calf thundered the raging cows.

From over the hill appeared three riders—Running-Iron Pete, Tip Hankins and old Dan Roberts—but too far away to do Blaze any good. He'd be caught, hooked, gored and trampled in a matter of seconds—unless Clint Steele acted!

But why should Clint act? By all rules of reasoning, nothing should please him better than to see Blaze Bain "fixed good and plenty"!

"Stop 'em! Help me!" yelled the frantically racing man.

"Run, yuh low-down coyote! Run!" shrilled Clint. But he was taking down his rope, was speeding forward as fast as poor old Chief could go.

Then when only two feet intervened between Blaze and the needle-pointed, flashing horns, Clint cut between them, bent the cows aside—all but one. The calf's mother dodged him, darted behind old Chief and lunged on after her calf, now speeding ahead of Blaze. The other six cows, diverted from their purpose, shot away down the valley. Clint spun Chief about and sped after cow, man and calf; and from afar, as he spun out a loop in his rope, he heard whoops of delight from the three cow-punchers racing towards the scene.

"Hook 'im, cow! Hook 'im, cow! Fifty bucks that the old heifer gets 'im!" Old Dan Roberts' shrill yelp.

And head low, murder in her eyes, the cow hooked at Blaze, tore his pants over his hip. He cried out with terror as he leaped frantically sideways. The calf held straight ahead, but the cow followed Blaze. She'd fix that thing that was after her baby!

Her head jerked again in a savage twisting thrust, and again Blaze shrieked. One horn had found meat this time. Then Clint's rope sped true. Old Chief, trained rope horse, from full speed stopped dead; but as the rope tightened about the cow's horns, Clint urged him forward, slowing the cow, not with a jerk that would throw her, but gradually.

She fought the rope, but she had eyes only for Blaze Bain. Her speed was diminished, but she was still right after him, more angry than ever now.

"Hold her! Throw her!" yelled Blaze over his shoulder, seeing that Clint had his enemy roped. "What the devil yuh doin'? Stop her!"

"Keep travellin', old stink lizard! Keep travellin'!" called Clint, holding Chief to an easy lope which held the rope taut and just barely prevented the cow from goring Blaze. "Better head south, 'cause I aim tuh run yuh a couple o' miles or so."

Running-Iron Pete, Tip Hankins and old Dan loped up beside the kid. They waved their hats. They whooped with glee. They threw taunts and derision in unlimited doses after the panting, scrambling, purple-faced boss-for-a-day of the Frying Pan outfit.

He was too winded and far spent to make answer, and the cow held unswervingly to her purpose.

"Fer God's sake, boys, save me!" gasped the baited man. "I'll—I'll do anything fer yuh," he sobbed.

"It's up to the kid!" cried Running-Iron. "He's got the toughest bone tuh pick with yuh."

"It's Clint's party!" whooped old Dan Roberts. "Dang yore hide. Yuh knows he had orter 'a' let the nice li'l cow kill yuh."

"Sure he had," agreed Tip. "Ho, Blaze, but won't the rannies gobble this up an' give yuh the razz! That-a-bossie! Jab 'im! Hook 'im!"

"I'm d-d-done. Can't . . . uh . . . run . . . no . . . more." Blaze's words came in jerking gasps, and he fell headlong.

Like a flash Clint planted old Chief just in time to keep the cow's horns out of the victim's body.

That evening, to the round-up camp at Wild Cat Draw, where the day's gather had been bunched earlier, came foreman Art Banks accompanied by Tom Crawford, owner of the Frying Pan outfit.

"Well, rannies, how'd yuh make out to-day?" asked Banks, swinging from his horse.

"Fine," drawled Running-Iron Pete. "In fact, Art, we done a heap better'n we has any time since we started out. Yep!" And he grinned.

"That so?" said Banks somewhat uncertainly. "Do you hear that report, Mr. Crawford? Reckon I'd best resign in favor of your pet, Blaze Bain."

"My pet?" interrogated the rancher, flushing slightly and glancing all about to see if Blaze was present, which he wasn't. But beyond the chuck-wagon stood a small bay pony; and one waddie, hidden from Crawford's view by this horse, was currying it or something.

"Ye-ah," returned Banks, gazing curiously at his employer. "Knowin' how yuh cottons tuh Blaze, him bein' related to yuh an' all, I kinder thunk it was up to me tuh make him boss while I was gone."

"Eh? Yuh mean that, Banks?" Jim Crawford seemed puzzled and angry. "Me cotton to that ornery whelp? Him a relative? Oh, I see he must have spread that dope himself, for his own ends. Why, the lying pup! Where is he?"

Running-Iron Pete stepped close to Frying Pan's owner and looked him in the eyes.

"Wal, the hull kit an' caboodle o' us is relieved a heap tuh hear them words from yuh. Uh-huh. Yuh see, the last we seen o' that 'ere walloper, he was headed south 'crost the foothills, dependin' on his own locomotive power. An' he didn't act like he had no intention o' comin' back, neither."

"Yuh don't say?" Crawford shouted. "Well, I surely want to congratulate the rannie that put the kibosh on Blaze Bain! How'd—"

"Wal, they was a pony named Nubbins helped a sight," Running-Iron interrupted. "An' they was a nice old hook-'em cow what done plum' noble service. But as yuh can't congratulate neither of 'em, Mr.

Crawford, I reckon young Clint Steele is due to receive all that honor.

"Hey, Clint, the boss ain't agoin' tuh crawl yore frame. Everything's jake an' then some. Come out from behint that li'l Nubbins hoss. Yuh've cooed over him an' petted him long enough."

S T E P H E N
P A Y N E



Rickey Rides Again

WHEN I quit the Bell 4 and rode toward Rambler, with my wages swelling one pocket and Beth's last letter warming another, I was the new Rickey McDowell. The reformed Rickey. No more penny ante, no more aimless drifting and, especially, no more horse trading. Beth was due home on the motor stage this mid-July Tuesday evening. I was to buy the ring we'd picked out before she went away, and meet her at the station and—

Well, I was going to take pride in telling her what old man Polk, of Bell 4, had said when I had asked for my time: "You've settled down to giving me an honest day's work for a change. I'll be sorry to lose you, Rickey."

I've worked for dozens of cowmen, and found most of them acidly sarcastic. So Polk's kind words touched me, and I said, "It's Beth's influence, sir."

"Humph," he answered, giving me a shrewd look.

"Now I half believe love works miracles. How're you and Beth's Aunt Kay hitting it off?"

I felt the red run up my face and spill over into my sandy hair. "Between you and me, sir, we don't. But Aunt Kay will have to give in when Beth wears my ring."

"Ye-es? A strong-minded woman, Miss Kay Harding. Hell-bent to make what she calls a good match for her niece. She said she sent Beth East last autumn to break up her silly infatuation for a thriftless, horse-trading saddle tramp named Rickey McDowell."

I could almost hear Aunt Kay speaking. For some reason I irritate her beyond all reason and she has never pulled her punches. But I had the satisfaction of knowing that her strategy had failed.

My boss went on, "Rickey, even though Beth owns a half interest in the little T-K ranch, Aunt Kay owns the other half, and I can't figure her sharing her home with you."

"No, that wouldn't work. But, Mr. Polk," I said, grinning, "some time ago I wrangled Aunt Kay into promising that when I hand her a thousand dollars as down payment for her interest, she'll pull out."

"Ye-es?" Polk squinted at me. "How on earth will you raise a thousand dollars?"

I shrugged that off as of no great moment, stepped up on old Snifty and hit the trail.

Daydreaming, and happy as the meadow larks in the sage, I jogged along until, a half mile short of Rambler, I met a heavy-set, moon-faced stranger on



horseback leading a bay 7-Dot-7 horse that instantly caught and held my envious eyes.

"Crackajack horse you're leading," I said.

The man's face lighted with pride. "If Sherman ain't the best roping horse in the U. S., I'm a liar."

I reckoned he probably was a liar. Most horse traders are, not excepting Rickey McDowell. But if this bay was really a roping horse, my thoughts began to run loose and wild and far ahead. A top cow hand like me could maybe win close to a thousand dollars at rodeos if he owned a top-class, well-trained roping horse.

"You a roper?" I asked.

He grimaced. "Unfortunately, I ain't. And I'm broke, to boot. On my way to Featherstone to sell Sherman. Nice to have met you, ranny."

"Wait a minute. If you're figuring to sell Sherman, you mind if I try him out?"

"First, show me how much cash you've got."

He was so belligerent that I forgot caution, pulled my roll out of my pocket and said, "Four hundred dollars in that wad. Just over the hill to the left there's a herd of old man Polk's cattle. Nobody near to raise hob if I practice roping on the critters. What say, mister?"

"Gregory's my name," he answered. "And as the saying goes, a bird in the hand—"

I put my saddle on the bay, and when I set him after a husky calf I realized, with the strongest thrill a cow hand can feel, that I'd never been astride such a horse or one trained like Sherman. He laid himself up alongside that running calf, and the instant I dropped my noose he stopped and planted himself. I had the calf hog-tied in nothing flat.

Gregory asked offhandedly, "Suit you, Rickey?"

Just in time I remembered I'd once been a horse trader, and replied, "Aw, he's not so bad on calves. But I wonder if he's any good at all on a heavy critter? And, by the way, how'd you know my name?"

"You told me," Gregory answered. "'Rickey McDowell,' remember?"

I didn't remember, but I was too eager to be suspicious as I picked a rangy steer for my next victim.

Again Sherman opened my eyes until I had visions of winning enough roping contests to be able to make the down payment to Aunt Kay.

An hour later, when we closed the deal, Gregory pocketed my whole roll. He endorsed over to me the bill of sale from the owner of the 7-Dot-7 brand and headed south toward Featherstone, while I rode into Rambler, sitting sideways on Snifty so I could look at Sherman as I led him to the livery barn. There I stalled him and fed him myself. I even curried him.

Being broke is no new experience for Ricky McDowell, and I was happy, though hungry, at nine that evening when the auto stage rolled in and Beth got off.

To me, she was prettier than a deer against a blue lake at twilight. Neat figure, silken black hair, bright dancing brown eyes and a saucy little nose.

Beth's last letter had said, "Aunt Kay knows I am coming home. But I've persuaded her to let you and me have Tuesday evening in town together, Rickey. She'll drive in and get me Wednesday."

I picked up her suitcase and she tucked her hand under my arm and we walked to a little park where we'd be alone among the trees and sweet-smelling flowers. I hugged her and she held up her left hand and whispered, as if this was something romantic and mysterious, "What are you waiting for, Rickey?"

I had trouble with my throat. "You mean the ring, Beth?"

"Yes, Rickey, darling. I've waited a long time for this moment."

"Me too. How soon can we be married, honey?"

"Married? Not until you've earned a thousand dollars. And, Rickey, we aren't even engaged until I'm wearing your ring."

"The ring? Oh, yes, the ring." I began to realize I had underestimated the importance of the ring.

"You talk so funny," Beth began.

I couldn't hedge any longer. "It's this way, honey: I had the money for the ring, and then I saw the most wonderful roping horse, and with him I can win enough to pay Aunt Kay and—"

"Rickey! You've spent your money for another darned old bronc! Rickey, I do think— Oh, what's the use?"

Beth snatched her bag and ran toward the hotel. I blundered along behind, begging her to wait until she saw Sherman. It took me an hour to persuade her that Sherman was an investment, not just a horse trade, that would make our marriage possible. Finally she said, "All right! I'll look at your cayuse in the morning. And he'd better be good! Now go away and let me alone."

I slept in the livery-barn haymow. At dawn I was feeling lank. No dinner, no supper and no girl—unless I sold Beth on Sherman. She had been ranch-raised and would know a real roping horse when she saw one.

I borrowed a saddle from the liveryman for Beth to use on Snifty, put my own outfit on Sherman, and we rode out to the same range where yesterday I'd practiced roping.

I was worried, for Sherman seemed to be badly off his feed this morning, logy and stupid. Nevertheless, when we approached a herd of Polk's cattle, I crowed, "Just watch."

By digging my spurs into the horse and yanking him this way and that, I finally got a steer cut out of the herd and took after it, my mount lumbering along like a freight wagon.

"Lay into it, horse!" I yelled, but when at last I did noose the steer, Sherman snorted and shied off as if he'd never had a rope thrown from his back. By main strength I got him stopped, and just then old man Polk rode over the hill and saw what was going on.

Polk's gray whiskers were standing out like spikes as he dashed to where I was having a battle with a horse and a wild steer. "So it's you, Rickey McDowell! What's the idea?" I was too busy for idle talk, so he answered his own question, "Practicing roping on my cattle! Chousing the fat off 'em! By grab, if the girl wasn't here, I'd rawhide you!"

"It was an accident, Mr. Polk. I was dragging my rope to take the kinks out of it, and that steer just happened to step in the loop."

"Stepped in it with his head?" snorted Polk. "Well, throw 'im and get your rope off."

"I've been trying to for five minutes," I panted.
"But this horse—"

"Is that animal really a horse, Mr. Polk?" Beth's voice interrupted. "Rickey told me it was a great roping horse."

"Rope horse?" said the old cowman. "That critter? Stick horse. Regular jughead."

He roped the steer by its hind legs, threw it and held it down for me to get my rope free.

Sweating, panting, disgusted and mightily confused, I examined my 7-Dot-7 horse with closest attention. In build, brand, markings, legs and feet, and even his teeth, this nag looked enough like Sherman to fool any horseman. But his eyes didn't have the spark of intelligence and personality I'd noticed so strongly in Sherman's. I knew this wasn't the horse I'd bought yesterday.

Meanwhile my ears stung with Beth's comments. "So that plug's your Sherman, a trained roping horse? And you spent all your money for that counterfeit skate."

At this very bad moment, by some freakish chance—perhaps more of the hard luck riding me—Aunt Kay, in her little automobile, hove into sight.

Beth rode to meet her and jumped into the car with her, leaving Snifty for me to pick up. Dumb and stricken, I saw Aunt Kay put her arm around Beth's shoulders and say, in a voice intended to be overheard, "There, there, you poor child. At last that good-for-nothing is all washed up. Good riddance."

Aunt Kay shot the car along on the road to Rambler.

Polk burst out laughing. "Spent your dough for a gold brick, huh, Rickey? Who hooked you?"

I felt as if I were running a high fever. "Keep it under your hat, Mr. Polk, or my reputation as a horse trader—" My voice trailed off as I realized that no one would believe the truth, no matter what I said.

I showed Polk my bill of sale. "That look okay to you, sir?"

He read it:

"To whom it may concern: I have this day sold to Philip Gregory one bay saddle horse, seven years old, branded 7-Dot-7 left shoulder. Value received and title guaranteed. JAMES GOODSPEED.

"For value received, I hereby transfer title to above described horse to Rickey McDowell. PHILIP GREGORY."

The old cowman handed back the slip of paper. "All right as far as I can see, Rickey. I am acquainted with Goodspeed, and that's his signature."

"Thunder," I growled. "Neither till now did I have reason to wish a bill of sale went into details about a horse's sense and intelligence and training. Mr. Polk, can I claim Gregory sold me one horse and then, unknown to me, substituted another of the same brand and age and appearance as the one I bought? I mean, have I got a case?"

The cowman lifted his eyebrows. "Did you see anybody substitute this plug for the one you claim Gregory actually sold you?"

"No. But at the livery barn in Rambler nobody pays any attention to cowpunchers coming and going any time of night. A crook could easily—"

"Can you call even one witness?"

"Afraid not, sir."

"Humph. If you were to have Gregory arrested, they'd laugh the case out of court. Your yarn—" Polk shook his head and snapped his fingers. "Still, I'm honestly sorry to see you get it in the neck two ways. Even if you're a horse-trading fool, you're a likable cuss. So long."

I sat down in the sagebrush to console myself with a cigarette. Thinking it over, I decided that in order to put across his substitution play, Gregory must have had this counterfeit horse hidden close to Rambler. If I could locate this hideout, I might get a clue to where the moon-faced crook had gone. The horse itself, through instincts natural to any horse, even a jughead, might take me to the right place.

Mounting Counterfeit and leading Snifty, I poked slowly along the road in the vicinity where yesterday I had met Mr. Gregory. And, as I'd dared to hope, Counterfeit soon turned off and ambled toward the thick willows bordering Rambler River south of town.

The plug made its way through these willows to a spot where quite recently had been a camp. Signs showed that three horses had been kept here for several days and nights, and Counterfeit was right at home in this spot. The camper had had a car and.

a horse trailer, which I tracked through the willows, across the shallow river, and to a point where these vehicles had taken the main road east toward Edgemont, seventy-five miles away.

Ah-ah, with a crack roping horse like Sherman, the crook would likely go right to Edgemont, where a big rodeo was scheduled to open on Thursday afternoon, which was tomorrow.

I rode the grub line, and the following evening, Thursday, reached a ranch a quarter mile from Edgemont. Here I put up, because I couldn't pay for a meal in town and because I must do some scouting.

While I was at supper with the kind old rancher and his wife, their young son came whooping home and reported the opening day of the rodeo had been a humdinger. "And say, dad, a swell-looking ranny named George Carey won day money in both the calf ropin' and the steer ropin'. He'll win top prize money in both them contests, 'cause he's sure got a ropin' horse."

Supper over, I walked from the ranch to the place in the rodeo grounds where stalls and living quarters were provided for the contestants. There, after an hour of prowling, in one set of those stalls I found my 7-Dot-7 horse, Sherman.

My excitement was a prairie fire, yet I managed to ask a hostler off handedly, "Who's renting these stalls?"

"George Carey."

"Has Carey got a partner named Gregory?"

"Gregory? Never heard of him."

Very carefully I sized up the stall that housed Sherman and the lay of the land. Then I plodded to the gay and crowded town, and in the most prominent and noisiest dance hall I spotted a big handsome fellow dancing with—for two stunned minutes I couldn't believe it—dancing with Beth.

I nudged a cowboy. "Who's the geezer with the black curly mane, wearing California pants, fancy-stitched short boots, gaudy striped shirt?" pointing to Beth's partner.

"That's George Carey," he said, pitying my ignorance. "Top rodeo hand of 'em all."

Carey. The name had been tickling a cell in my brain. Now all at once, and with a jolt, I got the connection. One of Beth's letters had told of a major rodeo in the East where she had met "a very colorful and most successful rodeo cowboy, George Carey. He's giving me a great rush, Rickey. But don't you worry."

Further observation from the door showed me Aunt Kay on the sideline, watching the couple with approval.

Aunt Kay and Beth and Carey, all here in Edgemont. I put two and two together. Had my meeting Philip Gregory on Tuesday been mere coincidence, as I'd supposed? Oh, no. Gregory, I now realized, had been working for Carey. It was really George Carey who had engineered this deal.

But Aunt Kay was in it too. Otherwise Carey could

not have known Beth's and my plans. Nor would he have known that a good horse was the bait for me. However, I didn't and couldn't believe that Aunt Kay had had any part in the crooked work. She had probably told Carey only to head me off before I reached Rambler and get me into a horse trade that would take all my money, so it would be impossible for me to buy the ring for Beth. Carey had roped in Gregory, and the two had gyped me. Aunt Kay, having picked up Beth when she was completely disgusted with Rickey McDowell, had driven to Edgemont to meet Carey. It certainly looked as if she held all the trumps.

Burned up, I forced my tired feet to take me back to the ranch where I'd left Counterfeit. The rancher, his wife and son had gone to Edgemont, so no one saw me ride Counterfeit away and presently return, riding Sherman.

Early Friday morning I dropped around to the hotel and found Beth alone in the lobby.

"Hello, honey."

"Rickey! What are you doing here?"

"It wasn't because Aunt Kay invited me. I suspect that your coming here was more her idea than yours."

I waited for her to correct me. She didn't, and I went on, "I'm late for the rodeo, but I'll be roping calves and steers this afternoon, if I can raise the entrance fee. Beth, honey, the only way to get the ring is for you to stake me."

"Yes?" She was as warm and pleasant as four below

zero. "Are you intending to use that wonder Seven-Dot-Seven horse?"

I winced as I pulled a chair up close. "Beth, I'd not squawk if I'd got stung on the up and up, but here's Carey, helped by Gregory, whipsawed me." I told her about it.

Long before I was through, Beth interrupted, disturbed, yet plainly very doubtful. "Rickey, you don't really expect me to believe a word of this?"

"Honey, you saw the jughead I was riding Wednesday. You've seen Carey's top roping horse. See what I mean?"

"Yes. The two horses look exactly alike, but that doesn't prove anything."

"But it makes it possible to substitute one for the other," I put in.

"But George Carey wouldn't— There he is now. . . . Oh, Georgel!"

Carey was the last man I wanted to meet just then. I started to duck, but Beth caught my sleeve. There was color in her cheeks as she introduced us and then told Carey about my deal with Gregory and about the horses being switched in the Rambler livery stable.

"And, George, Rickey says he believes you were camped in the willows near Rambler with your car and—"

"I was not," Carey broke in. He looked at me scornfully. "What is this?" he added. "Cowboy, you must be drunk or crazy."

"Neither," I said, relieved that he hadn't yet learned of my activities the night before.

"Then you are a liar," Carey replied, which was the last thing he said for some time, as from then on there was excitement and roughhouse of the kind I enjoy. Carey proved a rough, tough scrapper, but I had him down and was whanging his head on the floor when four men dragged me off.

One was the sheriff, and right on the spot Carey had me arrested for assault and battery, swearing I was a drunken maniac and a dangerous character. From the corner of my right eye—the left was swollen shut—as the lawman collared me and hustled me out, I saw Aunt Kay on the stairs.

She had taken Beth under her wing and was saying for all to hear, "So Rickey's become a drunken, brawling rowdy! How disgusting!"

Sheriff Beales locked me up in jail. I have been in worse places, for at least they feed a jailbird. But today of all days I longed for my freedom, so I could enter the rodeo. Until two o'clock I hoped Beth would bail me out, but no one came.

By three o'clock the only thing I could get a chuckle out of was how Carey was making out on Counterfeit. Then I began to worry that he would locate my two horses and put over another switch. After all, he'd been smart enough to get me out of the way.

I was far from happy when, at dusk, Beales brought me supper. He set down the tray and was turning out of the cell when Beth came in.

She said breathlessly, "I had to slip away from Aunt Kay to get here at all, Rickey. . . . Sheriff, may I speak to the prisoner alone?"

Beales looked at her with the sharp interest any man would show in a girl as pretty as Beth. "Okay. But through the barred door, ma'am." He went back to his office.

I perked up. "Honey, you're going to get me out of here?"

"No. Aunt Kay won't let me bail you out. She says—"

"She's delighted," I finished for her. "Did her dear George Carey win the roping events this afternoon?"

"He didn't compete. He told Aunt Kay he was too badly battered up, perhaps injured internally."

"The big liar." I swallowed my cup of black coffee at one gulp. "Beth, if I could get out of here, I'd win the roping tomorrow."

"You'd win the roping tomorrow?" Beth said in a very odd voice. "Rickey, I telephoned Jim Goodspeed at the Seven-Dot-Seven ranch."

"Uh? What for? What about?"

"Early this spring, Carey and Gregory—they were together—each bought a horse from Goodspeed and each was given a bill of sale."

"And either bill of sale will fit either nag," I said. "So what good is that?"

"The phone call cleared up certain points for me," Beth went on.

"Honey," I said, "does this mean you halfway believe my side of the deal?"

Her face was unreadable, but there were sparks in her brown eyes. "Where are your ponies now?" she countered. "Snifty and the other? Oh, I won't tell anybody. I just thought someone should take care of them, and I can do that much for you."

I told her where I had left my horses, and a moment later she was gone. Gone without getting me out of jail. Well, I never let worry cut into my rest, if I can help it. I tried the cell cot, and Sheriff Beales woke me at eleven, saying Carey wanted to see me.

By the light of a dim lamp in the corridor, George glowered at me through the bars. "I'll get to the point," he said. "You can step out of here a free man, if you'll put Sherman back in my stalls and take away that damned plug."

So that was it. To save face and win the roping contests, he must have Sherman. In my best poker voice I said that I didn't know what he was getting at. He said I did—said it with vigor and profanity.

"I'll put it another way: I'll swap you the Seven-Dot-Seven horse I've got for the one you've got and give you five hundred dollars to boot."

"Go jump in the creek."

Carey was ready to bite the iron bars. "You fool! I can hold you in this jug indefinitely. Put that in your pipe and smoke it."

He was right. And the longer I was locked up, the

better chance he had of finding Sherman and putting over another switch.

"Your pal, Gregory," I said, "slickered me out of four hundred bucks. So hike your ante, George."

"I'll make it an even thousand."

"No soap. Fifteen hundred and fifty's my bottom figure."

"Why fifteen-fifty? Are you crazy?"

"I've a hankering to get back my original stake, plus the price of a ring for Beth, plus—"

"Don't get any ideas about Beth. I'm playing first fiddle there."

He stamped out to the sheriff's office, and for uneasy minutes I feared I had crowded my luck too far. Then back he came with a roll of bills. "Here's your fifteen-fifty. Count it, you robber."

Beales stalked along the corridor. "Carey ain't going to press any charges, so get out of here, cowboy."

"Thanks, lawman. . . . But, George, I insist Beales go with us as witness to the trade we're making."

"Suits me," George said. . . . "Sheriff, all you need to know is that McDowell and I are swapping horses."

"Not quite all," I put in. "See this cash? George has paid me fifteen hundred and fifty dollars to boot. I'm telling you this, sheriff, because somebody might take a notion to rob me."

The three of us went first to Carey's stalls, and George Carey led out the 7-Dot-7 horse which both he and I believed was the plug. I took the halter rope

and led the way to the ranch where my horses were stabled. The house was dark; no sign of life about the place.

George lighted a lantern and then led out the 7-Dot-7 horse from the barn.

"Satisfied?" I asked him.

"Yes. Are you?"

"Sure. . . . Beales, you've heard both parties say they're satisfied?"

The sheriff nodded. "This locoed swap's on the up and up. Though why George Carey trades off the plum best roping horse in seven states, and forks out a wad t'boot, is beyond me."

The two men and the horse for which Carey had traded faded away into the night as I led my 7-Dot-7 horse into the barn. At one and the same time, I felt sort of high and sort of low. Sure I'd outfoxed Carey and his pal Gregory, but losing Sherman came hard, and what good was money, unless Beth—

A sound caught my attention, and, whirling, I saw a slender figure slipping down the ladder from the hayloft. It was Beth. I reached the ladder in time to catch her before her feet touched ground.

"Sweetheart, this is no place for you."

"Oh, yes it is," she answered. "Do you think I'm going to let you throw away that cash, Rickey?"

"Uh? What do you think we ought to do with it?"

"If there's enough, make Aunt Kay that down payment."

I swelled with pride. "Plenty for that and for a

ring too. Wait a minute. How did you know about the money?"

"I still had some faith in you as a horse trader."

I whistled. "You expected George to hit me for a trade?"

"That's right." Beth tipped back her head and looked up at me. "Rickey, I don't believe I will ever break you of horse trading, so tonight I teamed up with you to put this one over."

I didn't get it. But drawing her a little closer, I whispered, "Yes?"

"I've been a busy girl, Rickey, for Carey deserved a hard jolt."

The 7-Dot-7 horse came up to us and nudged my ribs with its muzzle. In the lantern light, his eyes were eager and alive with something not seen in Counterfeit's eyes—personality and intelligence. He seemed to be laughing at us. Suddenly I tumbled.

Yes, she had been a busy girl, and George Carey would not forget the trade he'd made tonight. Not ever. For this horse, now again in my possession, was Sherman.

S T E P H E N
P A Y N E



The Coffee Kid

WHEN young Judd Foster hired out to the Lazy Y outfit in Scardale County, just before the beef round-up, he mentioned to Foreman George Lory the all-consuming ambition of his young life. Judd, a snub-nosed, wide-mouthed, wide-eyed youngster with jet-black hair and a winning smile, wanted to become a first-class cowpuncher.

Lory, who was every bit as easy-going, suave and tactful as a Hereford bull on the prod, had no use for green rubes around the cow outfit which he managed.

"I hired you to drive bed-wagon," he said. "Mind you do what the cook tells you and tend to your job proper."

The crestfallen kid felt very much like quitting at once, but he didn't. For he realized that the only way to climb the cowpunching ladder was to mount the rungs one at a time.

Judd quickly found that, in addition to loading

rolled beds and driving his bed-wagon, he had the great privilege of being cook's helper or flunkey. As such he was permitted to start the fire at four o'clock in the morning, and as the round-up progressed he found himself more and more often preparing the entire morning meal while cookee snoozed. Then Judd would wash the dishes, and the horse wrangler would wipe them.

But in a very few days the wrangler began finding other most important tasks to do, always at about the time the dish-wiping needed to be done. Judd took that as a matter of course; and then the Lazy Y rannies, seeing how amazingly green the kid was, originated the idea of personal table service to themselves. Their table was Uncle Sam's virgin prairie, and as they squatted about with their plates, cups, knives and forks somewhere within the vicinity of the cook's fire, they requested Judd to provide them with fresh coffee, biscuits, steak or whatever there was on the round-up menu.

Consequently, Judd nearly ran his legs off in his attempts to accommodate a dozen hungry men at once. Foreman Lory grinned and said nothing. He, too, liked personal service. The bed-wagon kid wasn't worth two whoops in a washtub for a solitary thing other than what he was doing. Why not "work" him? And why bother to jack up Boswell, the badger-like cook, as he should be jacked up? The outfit was getting their chuck.

Nor did the foreman reprove Fay Yoder, laziest



of horse wranglers, for sloughing his part of the work onto Judd's willing young shoulders. Even when dinner was late at a dry noon-day camp on Alkali Flats in a spot where wood was very scarce and

hard to find, George Lory did not reprove the wrangler whose job it was to provide wood, but took his ill humor out on Judd.

"We pulled up here at eleven," returned Judd in self-defense, "and I was a full hour gathering up enough buffalo-chips, sage-brush and wood to get dinner."

"I don't like them buffalo-chips for fuel," growled Lory. "The grub smells of 'em. Mind you don't use 'em again."

Judd said, "Yes, sir," and just then a waddy fifty feet from the fire called:

"Hey, kid, bring me some coffee, and bring the sugar, too."

"Yes, sir," said Judd again and trotted the fifty feet with the two-gallon black coffee pot and the five-pound lard pail full of sugar.

Round-up Cook Jim Boswell grinned as he sat resting his broad back comfortably against a wagon wheel,

"'The Coffee Kid,'" said he.

"Coffee Kid's right," sang out a waddie. "Right this way with your pot, Coffee."

Judd obediently trotted out with his coffee-pot to oblige, and another puncher called:

"More beans and a sinker, kid."

"Comin', Pete," said Judd.

"Better be gettin' at the dishes," suggested Boswell from his comfortable seat.

"Can't yet; Pete wants some beans."

"Hey, Coffee Kid, string out the rope for the corral," ordered Fay Yoder. "I gotta bring up the cavvy."

"All right," said Judd, but the eating rannies kept him jumping so that the rope was not stretched out on stakes from one hind wheel of the bed-wagon by the time Yoder drove the cavvy to an accompaniment of jingling bells up to the camp.

"Hey, what the heck you tryin' to play?" roared Yoder at Judd. "Whar's that rope? Why ain't it up?"

Judd, perspiring freely from his running back and forth, here and there and everywhere to wait on the waddies, jumped guiltily. However, he observed a slim stranger named Kin Pearson, who had joined the round-up the previous evening and was representing the Andiron spread, in the act of putting up the cavvy rope, so felt relieved, but he stole a furtive glance at Foreman Lory.

That individual had left his dishes out on the prairie some twenty feet from the fire, instead of bringing them to the cook's waiting dish-pan, as was the usual custom. And now, rope in hand, he was sauntering towards the cavvy. He paused and called over his shoulder:

"Coffee, you'd better be catchin' the chuck-wagon horses and bed-wagon team."

"Yes, sir," said Judd, and noticed that nearly all of the rannies had left their dishes right where they had finished using them.

Jim Boswell, still seated against the chuck-wagon's wheel and now puffing his pipe complacently, rumbled:

"Hey, Coffee, gather up them thar dishes."

Judd said, "All right," but he'd collected six halters which belonged on the six work horses—four to be hitched to the chuck-wagon, two to the bed-wagon—and with them ran to the cavvy. A thought in the back of his head was to the effect that always heretofore Fay Yoder had haltered, harnessed and hitched the work stock.

Kin Pearson, the Andiron "rep," met the kid before he reached the cavvy. Kin had already roped his pony and was leading the animal to where his saddle lay. He halted Judd with a gesture and said in a low tone:

"Kid, it's no skin off my nose, but this outfit is a-workin' you. Rubbin' it in on you to beat heck."

"What?" gasped Judd. "You mean—"

"I mean you'd better take a tumble to yourself," returned Kin. "You're doin' all your own work and half of the cook's and half of that darned lazy wrangler's."

"Eum?" said Judd, then grinned. "Well, that way I'll show 'em I'm some good. Lory'll put me on a-punchin' quicker if I make good at this, won't he?"

Kin did not reply, for Lory bellowed at Judd to get a wiggle on himself.

"Rope them work skates," he ordered as the kid

reached the cavy, where Fay Yoder lounged indolently in his saddle.

Judd joyfully said, "All right, sir," for he thought Lory was giving him a chance to practice cavy roping—a cowboy job. He picked up a coiled rope lying near at hand and promptly got called down by Jack Goode. That was his twine, by gorry. Judd ran back to the chuck-wagon and got a new coil of hard-twist Manila that had never been used and had no knots tied in it.

"Reg'lar granger knots," grunted Lory as the kid attempted to tie knots in each end of the rope and to fashion a hondo. "Tie 'em right."

"Gosh a'mighty, he can't even tie a knot," chuckled Fay Yoder.

"Lemme show you." It was Kin Pearson at Judd's elbow. "You take the strands this way and twist 'em so. There's the Turk's Head. This other knot is the Roly-Poly. Easier to tie. There's your hondo. Don't swing your loop. Fling 'er right out over the head of the hoss you want. Huh, you missed. Lemme show you. Say, kid, let me know when you're goin' to lam heck outa Fay Yoder. I want to see the scrap."

"Lam heck outa Fay? Why?" Judd slipped a halter onto the head of the work horse which Kin had roped. "Let me try again."

"Pearson, you ridin' with us? We're goin'!" shouted George Lory.

"Catch up with you," said Kin Pearson.

"Let the Coffee Kid catch his own horses," commanded Lory.

"So?" Pearson shrugged, swung onto his own horse and loped out after the Lazy Y punchers.

Jim Boswell bellowed, "Coffee, come here and get these dishes!"

"Just a minute," returned Judd, and frantically roped at one of the horses.

"You couldn't rope a post in a month of Sundays," derided Fay Yoder. "You can walk up to them work plugs, you know." He yawned and further observed. "It's twenty miles to Grizzly Draw, where we camps tonight."

Judd, with his perspiring face on fire, spilled six more loops and then descended to the ignominious expedient of walking up to the work stock and haltering them. When he had tied them to separate wagon wheels, Boswell, was still waiting for his helper to gather up the dishes scattered about on the prairie.

Yoder, as Jud trotted back and forth gathering up those dishes, observed that he'd be driftin' along with the cavvy because it didn't appear like the wagons'd ever be ready to roll. Accordingly he lashed the horses northward across the level reaches of Alkali Flats, and the cook with assumed indifference produced a greasy deck of cards and began to play solitaire.

Judd washed and wiped the dishes, put out the fire, packed the chuck-box, harnessed all of the

horses, hitched them up and then told Boswell they were ready to roll. But Boswell wasn't through with a most difficult game, and Judd started driving away without him. Judd didn't know the country, and Boswell's wagon always led; but Judd was following the trail of the cavvy and thought he'd get along all right. He did until he came to a wide draw with a trickle of sluggish water spread out in its center. Crossing that, his wagon sank to its hubs and the team, floundering in the soft ground, bogged themselves.

Judd was five miles from where he'd left the chuckwagon, and he didn't see anything of that vehicle; so, thrown entirely on his own resources, he unhitched the team and took them out onto firm ground, then he dug out the wheels with a shovel and, by tying the corral rope to the wagon tongue and thus getting the doubletrees and the horses on firm ground, managed to pull the wagon out.

All this took a great deal of time as well as hard work, and he was long after dark in reaching Grizzly Draw, which he did find by following the cavvy's tracks. To his surprise, Jim Boswell was ahead of him. The cook had known about the boghole and had detoured around it. He had supper ready, too, but both he and Yoder were loud in their denunciations of the bone-headed bed-wagon driver.

Judd was in time to provide the rannies with hot coffee, beans and so forth, and he was razzed on every side. It was all his fault that the meal was late, when those poor cowboys had ridden so hard all

afternoon. Yeh, they'd made a circle, bunched a herd, cut it, and now they'd have to stand night-herd. 'Twas a pity the cook couldn't have their chuck ready on time. That was the Coffee Kid's fault. His fault that he'd got stuck in the mud, too. He sure were a beaut', he were. Why, anybody would 'a' knowed that ground was soft.

Fay Yoder thought Judd had better rustle some wood for to get breakfast, and Boswell thought he'd better scrub up the dishes, peel about a peck of 'taters, slice about a quarter of beef and mix about a ton of biscuit dough, gettin' ready for breakfast, too.

The kid did all of those things and more. It was about eleven o'clock before he slipped in between his blankets, and George Lory dragged him from them at a quarter of four. As it was the fall of the year, it was always bitterly cold of mornings. But this morning Judd stuck his head out from under his tarp to feel a drizzle of icy rain striking his face. He was weary, and ached in every joint as he gamely dressed and started a fire in the inky darkness.

This learning the cowboy business and starting at the bottom wasn't a rose-strewn path. Yes, and George Lory was critical and harsh, always finding fault with what Judd did. He'd quit the slave-driving outfit. That's what he'd do. Kin Pearson had told him they were rubbing it in on him. He began to think such was the case, this wet, chilly, muggy morning.

Why, the cook was still snoozing in his bed under the wagon. And so were all of the waddies except

those on night herd. Those waddies had a perfect picnic, they did. Take of an evening, they were always running a horse-race or riding a bucking horse or else playing around like young calves. They had an hour or two every evening—well, not every evening, but lots of evenings—and they were always playing cards, or gambling some other way, while Judd had to work, work, work.

Yes, and all those punchers did was ride their horses all day long and maybe stand guard at night. That was a snap. This bed-wagon driving was the hardest job of all, especially when you had to rustle the wood and take care of the rope corral and do half of the cook's work, as well as all of the dish-washing and hitching up of the teams.

By George, was this Lazy outfit rubbing it in on him, or weren't they? Kin Pearson had said— The Kid heard Kin Pearson saying something else, and this time it was to George Lory as the two riders crouched over the smoking fire which refused to blaze brightly in the drizzling rain.

"Why you ridin' the kid so hard?" Judd heard Kin ask, but he did not hear Lory's reply. For out of the darkness, which was resonant with the musical jingle of cavvy bells, sounded Fay Yoder's voice bellowing an order at Judd Foster.

"Hey, Coffee, for lov-a-Mike, get that corral rope up!"

Judd jumped to obey, and in so doing left biscuits baking in a Dutch oven, left steak and potatoes fry-

ing, and the coffee pot just coming to a boil. Lory and Kin left the fire immediately to get their ropes from their saddles, so the cooking breakfast was left entirely unwatched.

Judd ran to the bed-wagon and picked up the thick, long and soggy corral rope and strung it out from one hind wheel of the wagon, driving four-foot stakes into the ground to hold it in place. The outer end of this rope was always held by a cow-puncher, but this drizzly morning no waddy appeared; and Judd found himself holding the rope while the ponies were bunched against it.

He couldn't abandon his post, and Yoder refused to take it; therefore, the breakfast was ruined and all the Lazy Y waddies waded into Judd. He sure needed a nurse, he did. He were a humdinger, he were. He were just about the uselessest green geezer what ever growed up without gettin' ate by the cows. Jim Boswell crawled out of his warm nest under the chuck-wagon and allowed he sure had one wuthless, mutton-headed helper. It sure got on a feller's nerves.

"Hey, you Coffee Kid, bring me some hot Java," he ordered.

Judd was hopping about to obey demands made by many other waddies for food, and was a little slow in delivering a cupful of coffee to Boswell. The cook bawled him out for that, and when he saw how the Dutch ovens had all been burned, said Judd would have to scour them out with ashes.

Judd tried to tell Boswell it wasn't his fault, but

the cook wouldn't listen. The kid was in a hectic state of mind. He felt that he must make good at this, his first important job, but he couldn't help feeling that the rannies were unjust and that he was getting it in the neck.

When the Lazy Y men had mostly shuffled towards the cavy, Kin Pearson drew close to Judd.

"Forked lightnin', kid! Ain't you got no spunk a-tall?"

"Yeh, I think so. You notice I ain't quit, but I reckon I would if I didn't figger I jus' gotta make good." Judd was grateful for the slim rider's sympathy.

"Make good, yeah," returned Kin, gazing at the boy curiously. "Guess I'd best not meddle," he continued. "Maybe you'll find yourself."

"What d' you mean, Kin? You said yes'day as this outfit was a-rubbin' it in; but Lory, he said I was to do what the cook said. Say, ain't I supposed to—"

"Did you do all you're doin' now the first day or the second or third day of the round-up?" Kin cut in. "Lordy, ain't you got no wolf-blood in you a-tall? Is it all jus' plain jack-rabbit? Kid, these Lazy Y rannies is laughin' at you plum' open-like."

"Why?" asked the naive kid. "Don't the flunkey—I mean the bed-wagon driver—"

"—do all you're a-doin'?" the cow-hand interrupted. "Judd," kindly, "your foreman's told me somethin' about you, how you want to make a hand and all. Well, you have to start in at the bottom, for you

can't start in as owner of an outfit, say. You have to work up, though there is many as starts about half way up. I refer to boys what gets on a-punchin' without the preliminaries of drivin' bed-wagon and cookin' and wranglin' horses.

"Now, you're right at the bottom of the cowboy business. In fact, as bed-wagon driver you ain't a cowboy at all, nor will you be as cook; but them two steps is right useful in your education, and when you graduates from 'em you can get you a mount, no doubt. Thing is to make good at what you're supposed to be doin'."

"Ain't I tryin' my darn'dest to?" cried Judd querulously, with strangely moist eyes.

Pearson shook rain from his hat and tapped the kid on the tattered slicker over his chest.

"Boy, runnin' your legs off a-waitin' on these chap-wearin' bipeds only makes you ridiculous. Take a tumble to yourself and show some spunk."

The Andiron "rep" started to slouch away towards the cavvy, where George Lory was loudly calling to Judd to come and get the work horses, but Judd stopped him.

"Wait a minute, Kin. Roswell's supposed to do what he was doin' the first day we was out, and the wrangler is s'posed to rustle the wood and—"

"You're wakin' up," said Kin Pearson. "Goin' to let me know when you lam heck outa Fay Yoder, ain't you?"

"Uh-huh."

But despite Judd's promise to Kin, the latter was not present when Judd became fully awake. At noon of that day the rain had ceased, but a leaden sky hung overhead and the soil underfoot was wet and slippery. The riders coming to camp at noon were in a bad humor, for the cattle had been particularly hard to handle. However, those same rannies would have Judd, the Coffee Kid and camp flunkey, spread out their beds to dry, and they'd run him ragged waiting on them while they gobbled up their dinner. And they chuckled about that.

But the first thing which greeted their eyes was a pile of wood near the fire, which looked as if it had been dragged up by a saddle-horse and not gathered by hand. Fay Yoder was chopping this wood up into lengths and throwing the lengths into a convenient pile. He did not desist from his task, nor look up, when the waddies came running to the wagon to get their chuck.

They thought it curious that Fay should be cutting wood. They thought it more curious when he returned no answer to their bantering queries of "How come?" And then they observed that his right eye was black-rimmed and swollen completely shut.

The waddies looked about for the cook, but Boswell was nowhere to be seen. Then for the first time they noticed that the chuck-wagon was connected behind the bed-wagon and that lead bars were ahead of the bed-wagon to accommodate not four, but six horses.

Judd Foster was attending to the pots over the fire, and he seemed oblivious to the curious glances and astonished exclamations about him.

"Grub pile; come and get it!" he yelled.

"Where's Boswell?" demanded Lory.

"Last I saw of him, he was hoofin' it towards town," drawled Judd. "He decided to quit."

"To quit?" yelled Lory.

"Uh-huh, you see, I told him that as I was doin' all his work I didn't need him around no more."

"You did, eh? When you start runnin' this outfit?"

"Never did start runnin' it," returned Judd. "Just straightened out my part of it after you fellers left on circle this mornin'. You see, Boswell bawled at me to gather up the dishes from here, there and yonder where you birds had left 'em, and wash 'em up. I told him to try takin' a little exercise hisself, and he got huffy about it. He come after me with the pot-hook, but I got hold of a neckyoke—A neckyoke beats a pothook all to pieces in a hand-to-hand scrap. Pretty quick Boswell he got a-sailin' 'round and 'round the chuck-wagon with me right at his tail. It sure were funny to see that fat man get up and drift, but pretty soon he tripped over the wagon tongue and I caught him. He was kinder winded-like and I guess I did take a little advantage of him on that account. Anyhow, I soaked him in the bread-basket a couple of soaks and brought the juice out his snout with another wallop. He were a-yellin' bloody murder, and here to help him comes Yoder.

"I had to treat him kinder rough, 'specially as he was tryin' to slug me with his quirt; but and howsoever, Boswell was pretty quiet by that time, and Fay he didn't stand up to me for long when I got that quirt away from him. Boswell, it seemed, didn't care to stay and have the boys shoot the gaff into him. He took his foot in his hand and went away yonderly. Fay he'd 'a' liked to go, too, I think, but I wouldn't let him. Somebody had to drive that horse cavvy, so I told Yoder if he left I'd foller him plum' to blazes and work him over proper. He seemed to believe me, and I tell you, Lory, he's been mighty nice about doin' everything I asked him to do ever since—Hey, Fay, you can go bring up the ponies for the men now. Put up the rope corral afore you start out."

Fay Yoder dropped his axe and said, "Yes, sir."

One of the Lazy Y cowboys seated at some distance from the fire had not heard Judd's story and now whooped:

"Ho, Coffee Kid, bring me some Java and some beans! Get a wiggle on you, too."

Judd turned his gaze in the speaker's direction, "Who was your servant this time last year?" he inquired.

"Wh-a-a-t?" gasped the puncher.

"Cowpunchers," said young Judd Foster, "I want to call your attention to the dish-pan. It's a-settin' right here on the ground at the tail end of this chuck-wagon. When you get done eatin', put your dishes in this pan, for I'll not pick up so much as a spoon offen the prairie."

"Say you, Pete," Judd continued, "what are you loungin' in front of them pots for? Fill up your plate and get away from there. I don't have no doggoned lousy cow-puncher a-clutterin' up my kitchen."

Pete said, "All right, cook." His eyes were the size of saucers and he moved with alacrity.

George Lory suddenly and unexpectedly clapped Judd on the shoulder.

"Shake, if you ain't bearin' no hard feelin's," he vociferated. "I was just a-lettin' this outfit ride you to see how quick you'd turn; in fact, to see if you did have any guts and gumption. Huh, gumption? I'll say you've got it! Why, at one jump you graduate from bed-wagon driver to cook, and what I mean you talk like a real honest-to-gosh old-time round-up cook, too. Boys, my lid's off to this jigger. He'll do to take along."

Judd felt his hand unmercifully squeezed in the foreman's grasp, but across the fire the kid's suddenly brimming eyes locked with those of Kin Pearson, and in the Coffee Kid's gaze was as much gratitude as one man can express to another in a look.

S T E P H E N
P A Y N E



The Pest

BIG Sis put the lunch basket in the wagon box and turned to me. "Dottie May, be sure to remember everything I've told you about how to treat Mr. Hare if he shows up today. But the best thing will be for you to come and get me."

I wasn't paying attention, because I was thinking what a picture Big Sis made with the morning sun bringing out the black sheen of her closely cut hair, the dimple in her right cheek and the alertness of her blue eyes. Of course, if I'd been going to paint her picture I'd have wanted a mountain lake for background instead of our ramshackle log ranch buildings and pole corrals.

Even her heavy work shoes, patched overalls and faded shirt couldn't hide her pretty figure. The ranch work she'd been doing since we'd lost our mother and our daddy hadn't made Big Sis look rough or weather-beaten, like most ranch women. Big Sis was deter-

mined to hold onto the V N Ranch and make something bigger of it for herself, for the twin boys and for me.

The twins, Lee and Ted, who are much younger than Big Sis, and very much older than me, as they often remind me, were sitting in the back of the wagon box, holding the halter ropes of an extra team. Aunt Kate says they're Jerry Bailey all over again, heavy-set, with short, square faces and ragged mops of black hair. I have seen them curry their saddle horses, but I've never seen the twins themselves look curried.

They never could start out for a day's work without saying something biting to me.

Lee overheard what Big Sis had just said, and he grumbled, "Trust that pest to gum up everything!"

And in his superior, big-brother way, Ted added, "See that you get the dishes washed and the house swept, pest. And don't burn up all the wood."

Big Sis clucked to the team, and the wagon rolled away toward blue mountains on the eastern skyline.

Stag was romping ahead of the team, but Lee howled at him, "Go home and stay home, you stink—" He twisted his head to look at Big Sis, and tapered off with, "You smelly mongrell"

Poor Stag! The ranch pets are all mostly mine, and because I love Stag, I decided that minute I was going to do something nice for him. But it was later than I'd figured before I got around to giving him a bath in the dishpan on the kitchen floor.



Somebody knocked on the door, which I had shut to keep out the chickens, the sow with nine pigs, Droopy, the dogie calf, and our goat, Billy.

"Come in quick and shut the door!" I called, hoping Stag wouldn't get out.

A man looking surprised came in. Not anybody I knew, he was on the smallish side, with a mustache. He had on a whole suit of clothes and a little gray hat, a tall white collar, dark tie, and shoes with pointed toes. City stuck out on him like a cattle brand. *Tenderfoot*, I thought.

I said again, "Shut the—" that being as far as I got. Stag had seen the opening. I had him by the neck, but he ripped loose, and just at the door, stopped long enough to shake himself. You know what happened.

What the gentleman said was a word I'm not supposed to repeat, though I hear it often. He took quick steps to one side, and he looked anguished at his striped trousers and then at me.

Stag being out of reach, and me knowing I'd not get hold of that mongrel, with right ear pricked up and left dropped down, again in a hurry, I said, "Now look what you done!"

"What I did!" his eyebrows lifting away up. "Little girl—"

He stopped to look around the kitchen, seeing the unwashed breakfast dishes, the fire in the cookstove out, dirty water on the floor, more water and soap and dirt off Stag on my overalls and lots-too-big shirt.

He noticed something else, too, for he said, "Phew! What a horrible smell!"

"It's why I was washing Stag," I told him gravely. "He tied into a skunk and got the worst of it. Big Sis won't have him in the house now, and Lee and Ted are off him too. Anyhow, mister, maybe the little washing he got'll help. . . . Who're you?"

The man took out a handkerchief and brushed at his pants with a pained expression. His light brown eyes stared and stared at me when I put the dishpan on the table and started to put dishes in it.

He said, "Great Scott! Washing dishes in the water she used to scrub her filthy dog!"

"Ain't no more hot," I told him, letting the dishes alone, "and the fire's out. I'm Dottie May Bailey, and this is our V N ranch, and looking like you do, I'd

think you hadn't come to the right place. Did you, mister?"

He said grimly, "Right place all right. I am J. J. Hare, to see Miss Ann Bailey on business."

J. J. Hare. I went kind of hollow inside me. *Oops*, I thought. *He's the man Big Sis said all of us Baileys must make a good impression on, because daddy left us in debt over our eyebrows to skinflint Jasper Coombs.*

Jasper Coombs is a neighbor rancher, though not a good one. He's also the loan shark in White Cliff, and when daddy couldn't get money from the only bank, Jasper got his hooks on him. Big Sis had said a new branch of a bank was to be opened by this Mr. Hare, and she'd sent an application for him to take over our loan—or we'd be just plain sunk.

Hare was expected in White Cliff, and Big Sis had been looking for him to size up our outfit. Now he was here and—I'd done it again!

I smiled, not to let on how fussed and scared I was really, and I said, "She's aditching."

He asked what was that, and I told him it was building a new ditch to tap Goose Creek, five miles over in another valley, to bring water to make hay land out of our sagebrush.

I went to the door to point where it was. Mr. Hare's one-horse livery buggy was in the yard, and, in the back end of it, our goat Billy was sampling the upholstery on the seat, and liking it, I guess.

Mr. Hare shouted, "Scat, you damned goat!" and

rushed out past me. Billy wagged his beard and jumped out of the buggy and scooted past the horse, which wasn't tied. It snorted and, almost upsetting the rig, and throwing out the seat cushion, it loped out of the yard headed toward White Cliff.

Mr. Hare howled, "Whoa! Whoa!" and ran after it. I was afraid he was gone for good, but he came back, panting and wiping his red face with the white handkerchief. "Confound it! Now I'll have to walk to town!"

I thought over what to say, with Aunt Kate in my memory, before I said, "I am contritely sorry, Mr. Hare." He blinked at me as if some of the mad was oozing away in surprise. "It is im-per-a-tive," I went on, "that we get a new loan from you."

"Yes?" He was all eyes above his straight nose and little brown mustache. "Why's it imperative, young lady?"

"That," I said, "is what Aunt Kate wants to make me into. And I'm agin it!"

"Revealing!" said Mr. Hare. "When will your sister be home? Now that I'm here, I suppose—"

"Late tonight. Big Sis had to go along with Ted and Lee to make 'em work. Even she can hardly do that sometimes."

"Do you mean your sister does a man's work on this ranch?"

He said "ranch" as if he didn't think the V N amounted to shucks, which I resented. "She pretty near always has," I told the gentleman. "Only when

she was away to school—a better one than there's here, higher grades and all—which she made the money to pay for herself, 'cause she wouldn't be under obligations to Aunt Kate, no matter what."

I wondered if I should go on and tell Mr. J. J. Hare how Aunt Kate would stake Big Sis if Aunt Kate got her own way.

He said, "You're certainly an amazing child. Well, I'm to tally the stock on this place, check the value of the improvements"—making a face at our log house and the other buildings as if they didn't rate very high with him—"and equipment, and have a look at the land itself."

"Yes, sir, Mr. Hare. I'll help you."

We walked past the bunkhouse, and we counted the pigs, the Red Island Rhode chickens, thirty-seven; the skim-milk calves and the milk cows, five of each, and four bulls in the little pasture with the milk cows.

He said they were surprisingly well-bred bulls, and I said, "Yes, for bulls, they do have good manners."

Mr. Hare looked funny-like. "The notation I have says your cattle are in a pasture where I can tally them," he said. "How can I get to that pasture?"

"Easy," I said. "Ride behind me bareback on Maggie, and I'll take you all over the ranch. Come to the barn."

He seemed uncertainly doubtful. He wasn't much used to riding, and didn't I at least have a horse and saddle for him?

I explained, "A tenderfoot wouldn't understand. But Ted and Lee raise the roof if anybody rides their horses, and Big Sis is 'most as bad. Big Sis was really raised a cowboy."

"Do you mean this amazing woman rides like a man?" Mr. Hare asked, with that lift to his nice eyebrows.

"Oh, you bet. In overalls, like me, astraddle a horse."

"Ye-es? A mannish creature, this sister of yours who digs ditches and rides astride and—"

"Ain't nothin' she don't do, and do good," I said proudly. "Though running a ranch and making a living for all of us was kinda heaped on her. She swings an ax like—"

"Must be a regular Amazon," said Mr. Hare, his eyes popping.

I said, "Oh?" which is what I often say when I don't get it, yet pretend I do. This Amazon thing was crazy, because it's a river I learned in geography at school.

I very carefully slapped Maggie's colt out of my way while I got Maggie out of her stall, so he wouldn't paste me with both hind feet. Maggie's built so low and chunky I can scramble up on her round back, and she's the smartest, yet pokiest, old thing you ever saw.

Mr. Hare looked worried. But at last, very awkwardly, he did get up behind me. I could hang to

Maggie's mane if I had to, and Mr. Hare hung onto me. He counted our other horses in the pasture, and we rode all over the main hay meadow, which was slopping wet with irrigation water that sloshed up on his pretty shoes and his trousers, Maggie being so low.

The colt, Stinky His Nibs, followed us, and so did Stag. I call the colt "Stinky" because he's an ornery little cuss, almost as mean as a skim-milker, and "His Nibs" because he's so all-fired important and cocky. Every time Stag would get close, Mr. Hare would go "Phew!" The half bath hadn't done much for that skunk smell.

I said how much hay we cut in the big meadow and the lower field, and how much land there was under fence altogether, and I pointed out on the sagebrush bluff where Jasper Coombs' ranch joined the V N, and said, "He's a grasping old hound, and so stingy they say he takes off his britches before he sits down, so he won't wear 'em out." Then, in a burst of confidence, I said, over my shoulder, into his face right behind me, "I can give you the low-down on everybody in this neck of the woods."

"Amazing!" said Mr. Hare. "How can you, a mere child, say that?"

"Oh, it's a pipe," I began, and stopped, remembering how I always got into trouble. No, I'd better not tell him I sometimes visited Aunt Kate Markham in White Cliff and tucked away things I'd hear her

friends say. A lot of old ladies visit her to drink tea—but mostly something else they call “Pick-you-ups.” And the gossip!

Mr. Hare said, “You were stringing me. You’re at the age of terrific imagination.”

“That’s right,” I said. “Sometimes I’m a bold pirate, and again I’m an Indian brave, and again I’m—”

“A fairy princess?”

“No!” Was I scornful! “Princesses are sissies! . . . Here’s the pasture gate.”

There were a hundred and fifty-two cattle, not counting the young calves, in the pasture.

“Well, the number of cattle and horses and the amount of land—I presume, too, the amount of hay harvested each year—checks with the figures given in your sister’s application,” Mr. Hare said.

“Yes, sir. We’ll go home now and I’ll fix a bait of grub while you wait for Big Sis.”

I started to take a short cut toward the house. That way led across a wide slough, plenty boggy, but Maggie’d wallow through it.

“‘Bait of grub?’” he exclaimed.

“Oops! Another boner,” I said. “You being a tender—a city man—I should have said, like Aunt Kate, ‘I’ll steep you a cup of tea.’”

“Oh, no! God forbid!”

“Forbid what?” I asked.

But we’d reached the slough and started across, Maggie bogging down almost to her belly and Mr. Hare lifting up his feet out of black, oozy mud with

a horrified expression on his nice face, as I saw, looking back. Stag and Stinky His Nibs skipped over like there was nothing to it, and we'd have made out dandy, only at the main channel, oozier and blacker than all the rest, Maggie came up high in front and went low behind, scrambling out. Mr. Hare and I slid off over her tail, and he was underneath me.

I was out of the slough first, and was catching Maggie when Mr. Hare got up and looked at his suit and his hat and up and down himself. Where his face wasn't muddy, it was white, and though I felt it coming on, I couldn't stop the laugh I let loose.

He put his hands against him to brush off mud. He choked, "My suit's ruined! Ruined!" He glared at me then. "You pushed me off, you little imp!"

That stopped my laughter as if I'd been slapped numb. It wasn't true! I forgot we must impress him favorably, and I contradicted, "You pulled me off. You did it on purpose."

"Ye-es?" He glowered some more, and his lips muttered. Then he looked toward the northwest across the sagebrush, which is the direction of Advance post office and the schoolhouse, where a stage runs out from White Cliff, and he started walking that way real fast.

I ran after him. "Please, sir! I—I tried my best to impress— What'll I tell Big Sis? That you will— You must wait to see her!"

Not turning, he gritted, "Deliver me from meeting any others of the family—if they're like you! Favor-

ably impressed? I'm impressed all right! But how!"

I was down. I was crushed. I even thought of leaving home. Lee and Ted often say they'd like to get rid of me. But my leaving would make Big Sis sad, for she loves me anyhow.

It had been almost noon when Mr. Hare came, and riding all over the V N had taken time, so now it wasn't very long till the wagon and two teams, with plow and scrapers, and the twins and Big Sis came home. I tried to wipe the mud off Maggie and off me, but it was still noticeable to anybody as sharp-eyed as Miss Ann Bailey. Yet what she saw first was our goat Billy in the yard, eating the buggy cushion I'd forgotten about.

I did have the fire in the cookstove going, and I'd wiped the water and soap and dirt off the floor, but not the smell. It just wouldn't wipe out. I'd dumped the dishpan out, too, remembering how Mr. Hare's nose and eyebrows had gone up when he thought I'd wash dishes in dog-bath water. I had heated another kettleful and the dishes were done when Big Sis came in, her overalls and her shirt and her hat, and even her real pretty tanned face, all dust and sweat.

"Who's been here, Dottie May?" her blue eyes on me the way they are when she really wants to know and when it's no darned use trying to fool her.

"Uh? Has somebody been here, Big Sis?"

"No hedging! I saw that buggy cushion." And then, "Let me look at you!"

"Honest, Big Sis, I'd have changed my clothes if I had any others 'cept my party dress."

"You'll take a bath in the creek, cold as it is." She sounded cold and shivery as the creek. "And change to your party dress."

"I'll do it this very minute," trying to slip past.

No good. She grabbed me quick. "Who's been here? Was it the bank man, Mr. Hare?"

"Yes."

"Oh! Why didn't you come to get me?"

"I could show him everything good as anybody, and I did. Only—" I stopped.

Ted and Lee had come in. Their eyes sort of glinted out of their dust-coated faces, for they knew something was wrong.

Sis said, "Out with it, Dottie May."

They pried—and I mean pried—the whole story out of me. It was a very painful scene.

Ted grabbed his hair on both sides of his head and pulled it. "Great suffering catfish! She—she took that banker around on her stupid old mare with the colt taggin' along, to show him the ranch!"

To Ted and Lee, that seemed the most humiliating thing that could have happened to a banker. But Big Sis thought other things were much worse. Much, much worse!

Generally she's calm and able to meet any difficulty, yet this night she was all ajitter. "I've tried to tell you kids we must have that new loan," she mourned. "We must have it or Jasper Coombs'll take

over the cattle. Then he'll foreclose his mortgage on the ranch. . . . Why did daddy ever let that shark get his hooks on this outfit?"

I wanted to ask where the hooks on the shark were, but the thing was too serious. Ted and Lee said Mr. Hare'd not do anything for us now, and I was to blame. They allowed I ought to be spanked.

In the morning, Big Sis set the twins to work, against their wishes; she hitched up Pokey and Fanny to the buckboard, put on her nice clothes, and went to town, taking me along in my only best dress to apologize to Mr. Hare.

I said, "But he drug me off."

"Dragged," corrected Big Sis. "And even if he did, you must ask his pardon. . . . I wonder if the buggy was wrecked and if we'll have to pay for it? Oh, dear! Yet I suppose that'd be no more than right."

I nearly forgot to worry, seeing seven antelope in the sagebrush in the distance and wondering could I catch one to make a pet of. Ike Beaver, the trapper, had promised me one for two years, but he hadn't come through yet.

Big Sis said to herself, "I wish it had been old Jasper all that had happened to. . . . I'll have to get you new overalls and a shirt out of my butter-and-egg money."

"And will there be ten cents over for an ice-cream soda?" I asked, hopeful, but not very.

"There will not! You don't get even a nickel today!"

White Cliff is always exciting, though I did get fed

up with it once when I was a week with Aunt Kate Markham and was homesick for what she called "that hovel."

Big Sis tied the team to a hitch rail, and we went to the one bank. If Mr. Hare opened another, there'd be another. This one is run by an iceberg named Fisher. He don't look like one, though neither does Jasper Coombs look like a shark. Big Sis had asked Fisher before today would he take over our loan. But she'd ask him once again. I was trying to be very dignified as we went in.

There were two men in the office at the side across a low rail. One was Jasper Coombs, not looking lean and hungry like a shark, but short and fat, with a wide-beamed smile and what Big Sis calls a "suave voice."

He said, "Why, how do you do, Miss Bailey? I was just leaving."

The other man was Bird Fisher, old and bald and all wrinkles, and so cranky he'd bite himself if nobody else was near. Only, his teeth being false and rattly, maybe his bite wouldn't be savage.

He said, sour, "Miss Bailey, the answer is still 'No!'"

"I was afraid so." Big Sis sort of drew in her breath and held onto it. "Have you seen Mr. Hare?"

Jasper Coombs had stopped with a hand on the doorknob. He cleared his throat. "Harrumph! I'm afraid it'll do you no good to see Mr. Hare this morning, Ann. So sorry you feel you must break off our most amicable business relationship," he ended,

smooth as pig grease, and went out and shut the door.

"Hare?" said Fisher with a deep scowl. "I've got no idea where he is. . . . Coombs is sure he won't lend you any money, Miss Bailey."

Big Sis didn't answer. She took my hand and we went out on the street. "Well, Dottie May," she said as if she was licked, "our only hope now is Aunt Kate. I must swallow my pride and ask her for help. One of the first things she'll demand is to be allowed to make a young lady of you—which might not be a bad idea."

That was a horrifying ideal "Look!" I said fast. "Mr. Hare's going into the hotel and he's got on a brand-new suit of clothes, hat and shoes. I don't want to see Aunt Kate and get sniffed at. I'll go see him and I'll fix everything."

"You've done that already!" said Big Sis with a laugh that wasn't either funny or amused. "Go and apologize to him."

She walked one way. I walked the other, into the hotel, and I asked Ken Ball, the clerk, which room Mr. Hare had. He told me, and I went upstairs to Room No. 9. I stopped outside, for voices were inside it, and one was Jasper Coombs' pig-grease voice.

He asked, "Is it a deal?"

Mr. Hare's voice said, "Let's see? You offered me five hundred dollars cash to turn down Ann Bailey's application?"

To myself, I whispered, "Ooops. Double oops."

Here's the sort of stuff Aunt Kate and her high-horse friends go for."

"Just between ourselves," said Coombs, "did you go out to the V N?"

"Yes," said Mr. Hare. "An experience I'll not soon forget. Fortunately, the horse came back to the livery stable with the buggy still intact. Yet I'm out forty dollars for a new suit, not half so good as the one I had. How can any human being live with that little female imp?"

"Aha-a-a!" said Coombs. "I see you met Dottie May. Adorable child! Adorable!"

Though I couldn't see it, I got the idea Mr. Hare glared at him.

Mr. Coombs said regretfully, "I see I might have saved myself five hundred dollars cash!"

Mr. Hare just blazed, "Did you believe I was going to take a bribe to turn down that application? You crooked old skunk!" He stopped, and then said, "I know now how they smell. You smell exactly like one. Get out before I—"

"Easy now," Coombs began, me chuckling so loud I thought they'd hear. But they made too much racket, smashing over a chair and the bed, and then smashing a window. There was a squeal and a solid thump, and then Mr. Hare jerked open the door and stood, sort of dusting off his hands, saying to himself, "A window to pay for on top of the rest! But worth it. . . . Wh—wh—hello, my dog-washing friend!"

I said, all big eyes, admiring him, "Mr. Hare, you're quite a feller!"

Before I could say any more, there were steps along the hall, and there was Big Sis. So I knew she'd turned back and hadn't seen Aunt Kate, and I was still safe from being made a lady.

She said, breathless, "Are you Mr. Hare?"

He said he was, and his eyebrows went away way up, though this time his nose stayed like it should. "Are you Miss Ann Bailey?"

"What's so astonishing about me?"

"He was expecting to see a river," I said.

"River?" said Mr. Hare.

"Amazon," I said, and he said, "I'll be—Oho! . . . Miss Bailey, I did get the wrong impression. Actually, you're—you'd take away any man's breath. About your application—"

"Yes? Yes?" said Big Sis.

"I have considered it favorably. Any woman as heroic as you"—he looked hard at me, with a meaning in his eyes that seemed plain to Big Sis, before he went on—"heroic as you are, deserves every business consideration."

"Heroic?" I said. "She's just as big a fraidy cat as me."

Big Sis didn't hear me. She didn't ask if I'd apologized either. She just said—and oh, the lift to her voice!—"Can we fix up the papers at once?"

He answered, "Yes," and flipped a quarter to me. "Buy yourself candy or a soda, Dottie May."

I saw Mr. Hare and Big Sis again about one hour later. My mouth and cheeks were all smeary with chocolates, some still in one fist, and a great big box of them under one arm, and, under the other, new overalls and shirt and blue jumper.

Big Sis stared. "What's this mean, Dottie May? Where'd you get money to buy those things?"

"Jasper Coombs kicked through."

"But that's impossible."

I said, "Sure, he pinches a quarter till the eagle screams. But this time he wasn't hard to handle. I cornered him and I said, 'How'd you like me to tell Aunt Kate Markham you tried to bribe Mr. Hare?' I said, 'In two shakes of a lamb's tail, it'd be all over town.' He used your pet words, Mr. Hare. He said, 'God forbid!' And I got the candy and the new clothes and a promise he's going to be a nice neighbor from now on."

Mr. Hare looked at Big Sis, not like some of the fellows who think they're in love with her, for he was much, much older, and wiser too. He looked at her sort of stunned.

"What will you do with her?" he asked.

Then he laughed, and Big Sis laughed with him.

S T E P H E N
P A Y N E



The Music of Spurs

THERE were tears in Gwen's brown eyes as she sat on the fence bordering one side of the lane which cut across Circle 2 ranch, waiting for the stage to come past. Behind her, in an open pasture and close by a willow-lined stream, lay the weathered log buildings where for one short week Gwen had made her home. Eastward, across the lane, the green meadow of Circle 2, bordered by piney ridges, flowed on and on until those ridges came together and blue-green timbered slopes beyond lifted to a jagged mountain skyline.

Far up along this meadow Gwen could see the Circle 2 hay crew at work as if she were watching a motion picture—men and teams and machinery, and a haystack taking shape and rising from the soddy ground. The subdued hum of moving machines was the music of this picture. And yesterday Gwen Hastings had been one of the actors in this great drama of putting up hay.

Only yesterday she had been driving a hay rake and—she shuddered, thinking of it—one horse of her team had kicked over the tongue while fighting flies. Then, before Gwen had had time to think or to act, both horses were running, and she had been thrown off the seat, landing, fortunately, behind the rake. When the team had been caught, there hadn't been very much left of the rake!

Gwen's young body still felt the cruel bruises, and her muscles were stiff and sore. But her mind was bruised far worse than her body. Its hurt went deeper. For George Robbins, the boss, had handed her a check and had said briefly: "Sorry, Gwen, but you'd better take the stage to town."

Gwen was fighting to keep her curved lips firm when she said wistfully: "What a flop I've been! When I was trying so hard to make good too."

She had been so eager to do her part in the man power shortage, and had believed she could help with the hay harvesting. Mother knew George Robbins, who owned Circle 2, and Robbins, a kindly, middle-aged bachelor, had assured Mrs. Hastings that Gwen might share his cook's room and be well looked after.

Gwen loved the out-of-doors and the freedom of ranches more than she cared for city life, and the first few days had been all joy. Mr. Robbins had patiently showed her how to harness and drive a team and how to operate a hay rake. Nor had he made fun of her, as young Harry Johns had done.

Gwen hadn't forgiven redheaded Harry for the way he'd razzed her, any more than she had forgiven him for being so unimpressed by her brunette prettiness. Harry held down a range-riding job for the Bell Dot cow outfit. Somewhere in the wooded hills north of Circle 2, he lived at a camp with only his ponies for company.

Hearing footsteps behind her, Gwen came back to the immediate present with a sudden start. Turning her dark head, the girl saw Mrs. Carberry, the ranch cook, approaching the gate. Although Gwen had tried very hard to get along with her, she simply could not like Mrs. Carberry, who was not a good cook by any standard.

Gwen wondered why the woman was carrying her suitcase, but before she could ask questions the dust-painted autostage rolled along the road and stopped. Sam Jason, the wizened old driver, called, "'Morning, Miss! Going some place?"

It was, however, the ranch cook who answered. "Yes, I'm going some place, Sam."

Staring at the older woman, Gwen asked in bewilderment, "Going? Where are you going?"

Jane Elizabeth Carberry lifted her chin defiantly. "To take a better job, dearie. You didn't know about it, did you? Neither does Robbins—yet. I've been talking with a certain party on the phone, and we settled on the wages he'd pay. . . . Oh, I left a note for old tightwad Robbins."

Gwen was thinking very fast. Where could Mr.



Robbins get another cook? He couldn't get one, now, anywhere—unless— This “unless” was something Gwen hadn't ever even remotely considered. Yet

now she considered it seriously, and made her decision.

Mrs. Carberry had seated herself beside Sam, and she remarked cuttingly: "Well, get in the car, you little ninny. Sam, the kid got fired."

"Uh?" muttered Sam. "That's tough to take, Miss. You figuring to ride with me?"

"No!" said Gwen. "No!"

The car rolled forward. Gwen jumped down from the fence and was sharply reminded of her bruises and her stiff muscles. She picked up her light traveling bag and ran back to the house, where the sight of dirty dishes strewn the breakfast table, dirty pots and pans cluttering the stove, and unswept floors, greeted her.

"Walked out leaving everything a mess!" Gwen exploded.

She put her bag in the room which had been hers and the cook's, quickly changed her traveling suit for a house dress and an apron, and then rebuilt the fire in the wood stove and went to work.

When the dishes were at last cleaned up, Gwen considered dinner. It must be on the table promptly at twelve-thirty. The kitchen clock indicated ten, which meant she'd have no time to spare. She hurried to the screened meat box on the shady side of the house, and presently there was a roast of beef in a pan, and the pan was in the oven.

But when she looked for bread, she discovered there wasn't any. So she must make biscuits. She

must boil potatoes and onions, and make a dessert for the men, too. Maybe she should open some canned food for this dinner. No—Jane Elizabeth had depended on cans until the men were sick of canned vegetables. Gwen would cook onions or bust, and she finally got both the potatoes and the onions on the stove to boil. Now for the bread and a dessert.

Jingle! Jingle! Jingle! The sound came from the direction of the stable, and Gwen's heart began to race and pound. She didn't want Harry Johns to see her looking such a mess. But already the range rider was at the kitchen door.

Harry was tall and slender and very good-looking for a redhead. His big Stetson was in his hand, and his wide-lipped smile was pleasing. But his smile went away as his eyes roved around the kitchen and then stopped on flushed and floury Gwen. "What's up? Where's Mrs. Carberry?"

"She's quit, but she left a note for Mr. Robbins on that shelf," Gwen informed him briefly.

Harry's eyebrows drew down and his ruddy face tightened. "The boss know you're here?" he asked abruptly. "I heard you were to be fir—that you wouldn't be here today."

Gwen finished cutting out the biscuits. "No, he doesn't know I'm here. . . . Harry, do you suppose he'll be mad because—because I'm trying—to—?"

"You silly kid, he'll be mighty glad. . . . Hey, I smelled onions boiling and beef roasting. But they won't be cooked in time for dinner."

Gwen flashed a look at the clock and sudden panic came over her. "Oh! It must have stopped. What—what time is it, Harry?"

He flipped out his open-faced silver watch. "Quarter of twelve," he announced, and moved quickly to the stove, his spurs making music as they rattled across the floor. He opened the oven and shook his head. "Beef's still plumb raw. Slap a couple of skilletts on the stove, Gwen. I'll cut steaks for you."

The roast was out of the oven and the biscuits were in it, and grease was smoking in two heavy skilletts when Harry came back with a platter of round steaks. "Open a couple of cans of corn to take the place of the onions," he suggested. "The spuds'll be done all right. Were you forgetting coffee? I'll make it, and set the table too."

"What about dessert?" Gwen asked. And then she laughed because she was almost happy. She would have been completely happy if yesterday's deep wound to her pride had not still been uppermost, coupled with a great fear that perhaps Mr. Robbins would not like what she was trying to do today either.

"Whip up a cornstarch pudding," said Harry, grinning at her as if they were pals. "Or open one of those gallon cans of pie fruit."

"You're a real help," said Gwen. "Where'd you learn to cook?"

"Shuckins! A cowboy must cook or he'd starve. You'd have made out fine if the clock hadn't fooled you."

Not long after, Gwen saw the hay crew coming in for the noon meal. Some rode in a wagon and led their teams, others rode one horse of their teams bareback. They would water the horses and stall them and feed them. Then they'd go to the bunkhouse to wash their hands and faces and comb their hair before they raced to the house for dinner.

Thanks to Harry, the meal was ready to put on the table! Yet to her surprise Harry announced: "I'm going to slip out, Gwen. And mind you don't tell Robbins you didn't do all of this alone."

"Why not?"

But he was gone, jingling his spurs to the corral, where he mounted his roan and disappeared along a trail leading through the willows.

George Robbins came in before any of the others. Like Harry, he stopped in the doorway, a stocky, quiet and deliberate man with weathered brown face and serious grey eyes which opened very wide when he saw Gwen in the kitchen.

Her pulses were fluttering, her knees shaking, as she said, "Dinner's ready, Mr. Robbins."

"Uh-um? Cook sick?"

"No. She left a note for you," pointing to the shelf. He picked up the sheet of paper and read aloud:

"I've got a better job. Send my check to the Smithers' ranch.

"Mrs. Carberry."

Mr. Robbins' face turned very red, and his lips tightened. "So she quit me in a pinch! And you, the girl I fired, stepped in to take her place!"

"I—I—well, I knew how hard it would be for you and the men. So I—Mr. Robbins, what I really hope is you'll give me another chance."

His eyes roamed over the table and the stove and at last came back to Gwen. "Looks like a bang-up meal, Gwen. I'm mighty pleased. . . . You suppose you can swing this job steady?"

Gwen surprised herself with sudden positive assurance: "Mr. Robbins, I know I can swing it!"

He smiled and put out his calloused hand. "Good girl!"

Later, when the evening meal was over and twilight was making the valley and the piny hills into a land of enchantment, Harry Johns's spurs came jingling into the kitchen there on Circle 2 ranch, and Harry Johns swept off his big Stetson and bowed to the girl who was washing dishes.

"I've got to tell you, cookie, the hay crew's tickled pink. Already you're making good in a big way."

"You're kidding," said Gwen, and smiled happily.

"Oh, no, I'm not! Though I aim to kid you plenty from here out. Right now, Gwen— Well, I brought Rowdy with me and I think it would be swell to take you riding this evening. What say?"

"Rowdy! The pretty bay you were riding when I first saw you! Oh, I'd love— But I can't go till these dishes are done."

The redheaded cowboy laughed and said joyfully, "Give me that dish rag and we'll have this done in jig time, and then—" He began to whistle "There's a Long, Long Trail A-winding."

S T E P H E N
P A Y N E



The Glory Ride

THE next event in the arena is the bronc riding contest!"

Tip Randall heard this announcement blare from the megaphone and couldn't help a wry twist of his lips. Here he was at the Antlers Rodeo, perched on the corral fence near the saddling chute straight across the wide arena from the crowded grandstand. But he felt oddly out of place, alone and friendless, for his name was not among the names of the contestants.

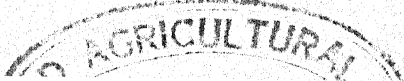
With a song on his lips and a dancing light of anticipation in his deep brown eyes—eyes which matched a smooth, lean-cheeked face tanned by sun and wind to the rich color of worn saddle leather—Tip had ridden one hundred miles to enter this bronc riding contest. Then, soon after his arrival yesterday afternoon, he had learned of the ruling in force at Antlers whereby each contestant must furnish at least one good bucking horse for use in the contest.

It was then too late for Tip to return to the Link Bar for a bucking horse, an outlaw; too late even to send for one. Yet, undaunted by this terrific set-back, Tip had scurried about to find a horse that would meet the requirements, and, apparently luck had been with him.

Tip hoped that he was now keeping a stiff upper lip, keeping his feelings well hidden. But deep inside he was still smarting over the tricky deal by which swaggering, loud-mouthed Bart Gillispe had whip-sawed him.

The corrals were filled with horses and wild steers and calves, all rodeo stock, and the saddling chute creaked as perspiring cowboys shoved a half-wild bronc into it to be saddled for the first of the contestants. Near this chute were bunched the lucky contestants, lean, brown faced men in the dusty, workaday garb of the range, good-naturedly razzing one another. Under other conditions Tip Randall would have been one of these fellows, giving and taking his share of the razzing. But today he was out of it!

A sudden burst of cheering drew his attention to the race track directly in front of the grandstand, where a big man wearing white Angora chaps, a pink silk shirt and a huge white hat, had appeared. The cowboy band was playing "Cheyenne" and the big man's mount, a trim little bay, nervous and frightened, was cavorting about as if it were a dancing horse.



Tip didn't know how hot and bright were his eyes as they watched the rider and the horse. Or how they flashed when he heard the voice of the announcer, through his megaphone, "Ladies and gentlemen! The bronc rider now on the track is none other than Bart Gillispe, Antlers' champion! Give him a hand."

As the audience responded Bart Gillispe dashed back and forth bowing and waving his white hat. The bay pony was unused to this excitement and Gillispe, in stopping and turning his mount, wrenched its mouth savagely; used his spurs wickedly as well.

Each wrench on the horse's sensitive mouth, each spur-jab was like a red-hot needle lancing Tip Randall's own flesh. Then close to him a contemptuous voice said, "Grand-standing! How Gillispe eats that stuff up!"

Tip looked down and saw the pushed-back hat and wide shoulders of the arena manager, Bob Stillings, and all at once he realized there was someone else here in Antlers who didn't go for Gillispe in a big way. On sudden impulse Tip blurted, "That's my Rowdy he's abusing."

At the words Bob Stillings, a tall, slim man, much neater than the average cowhand and with a strong wind-bitten face, turned and looked up at the cowboy. "Your horse?" His clear blue, wrinkled-cornered eyes questioned Tip.

Tip drew a deep breath, "I mean," he amended quickly, "Rowdy was my horse—until last night."

Something in Bob Stillings' mind seemed to click.



As arena manager he had a great deal to do with the horses used in this rodeo. "Humm? Why, you're the cowboy who tried to enter a dud, jug-head, a nag

that wouldn't buck! You traded yonder bay for that nag?"

"Yes," admitted Tip. He flushed painfully, remembering the humiliation he had suffered yesterday evening when the judges and arena manager had, with the help of cowboys, tried out most of the bucking horse entries.

Gillispe had solemnly assured Tip that the animal for which he had traded Rowdy was a first-class rodeo bucking horse—a regular star-knocking man-killer.

And too late Tip had learned how he'd been stung. The nag wouldn't buck. It wasn't an outlaw. It wasn't even a passable saddle horse and the cowpunchers had jeered, "That jug-head'd look better hooked to a plow."

It was with bitter reluctance that Tip had parted with Rowdy, and only because he must enter the contest and win if possible.

Bob Stillings was evidently expecting Tip to say something more, so he continued, "But I asked the champion to agree that after the show I might buy back Rowdy for seventy-five dollars."

What chance had he now that he'd been barred, to raise seventy-five dollars? None.

Something was delaying the contest; the field judges had not yet taken their places, nor had Bob Stillings mounted his beautiful palomino, the most superb horse Tip had ever seen, which stood nearby with bridle reins down.

"Shove over, cowboy." The arena manager climbed the fence to settle himself beside Tip. "Remember I was on hand last night when we were trying out some of the broncs? But we didn't try out all of them."

"I know," said Tip and almost added, "You were plenty hard-boiled, too, throwing me out like you did." He hadn't much liked Bob Stillings then, but he was beginning to feel that now he might change his mind.

Now the man snapped his gloves against his left wrist and explained briefly, "Rules. Our committee economizes by asking riders to furnish the bucking stock. Humn! There's one horse entered that I wish wasn't—nor I don't know how that old codger yonder got in."

Tip didn't understand. His gaze followed Stillings' to a man squatting on his bootheels a little apart from other cowboys. He was a wizened fellow, old and stooped and bald, with a deeply seamed face, washed-out blue eyes and a snowy horsetail mustache. All the limberness of youth had gone from his old frame, and he gave Tip the impression of creaking at the joints. A stove-up old-timer, in sharp and unfavorable contrast with the lithe, limber, younger men who'd ride here today.

"That's old Fred Harlow," Stillings resumed. "Been knocking around rodeos for the last twenty years, always playing in hard luck, always dead broke. He boned me for entrance fees. I turned him down—not

that I don't like him, I do, and not because I don't feel for him—but because I know he can't ride for sour apples and I don't want to see him get hurt."

A horse squealed in the chute close to Tip Randall, who was vaguely aware that a bronc rider was now settling into the saddle on a bronc's back. The megaphone blared the announcement:

"Clyde Armstrong, the first contestant. Clyde Armstrong on Sandy Hoofs. Coming right out!"

Field judges and pick-up men scattered out into the arena to take up their positions; the noisy grandstand became suddenly silent with tense expectancy; a black horse with a rider up, spurring and waving his hat, crashed from the chute.

The contest was on. Yet Tip scarcely noticed either horse or rider. He'd just had another shock, a shock almost as great as his failure to get into the contest. He looked Bob Stillings in the eyes and heard himself say:

"Fred Harlow can't ride for sour apples?"

"That's what I said. And I know— What's hit you?"

"Nothing much." Tip tried to be cheerful. "After I found I couldn't get in, I staked the old codger to entrance fees. He told me he had a great horse, a wonder horse and—"

"And he has!" Stillings broke in. "Sleepy Jack wasn't tried out last night because we know he's plenty good. Got a great record, that horse. Not generally known around here, but he piled Bart

Gillispie at Cheyenne. And between you and me I sort of thought he got Gillispie's goat."

"And," Tip went on with his own sentence, "Fred Harlow told me he yearned for one last chance. 'Twas easy to see that, and I know just how he felt. He said he was sure to win, too."

The arena manager was shaking his head. "Too bad, cowboy. You'll lose your entrance fee. Well, I suppose you can ride home on that dud Gillispie traded you?"

"Not if I can buy back my own Rowdy," said Tip grimly. "For my staking him, Harlow promised me a fifty-fifty cut out of what he won. But—" his voice trailed off.

Stillings eyed him shrewdly for a moment, then, "Maybeso we can sell that jug-head. You mind if I see what I can do about it?"

"Wh— I'll be obliged," said Tip with pleased amazement.

There was swirling dust in the arena and the sound of thudding hoofs. The pick-up men rushing in to catch Armstrong's mount. Tip heard a raucous cry from the grandstand, "Pulled leather!" One bronc rider had made his ride and had lost.

Stillings had mounted his palomino and was gone. Tip was perched alone on the fence, alone even though many cowboys were near, for he was out of it. Merely an onlooker. But, looking at old timer Fred Harlow, he saw in the man's eyes the light of glorious anticipation and he thought, "I'm glad I could give him his chance. It means so darned much to him!"

Another horse and rider were being poured out of the chute and sudden excitement ran along Tip's nerves as the megaphone said:

"This roan horse, folks, is Sleepy Jack. A horse with a great reputation. Bad to begin with, he's getting worse. That's wrong. He's getting better! The worse the buck, the better he is for a rodeo. There he goes. Watch Sleepy Jack. The rider is— The rider is off! Sam Ward has hit the dust from Sleepy Jack!"

It had happened in seconds. Split seconds almost. Tip had seen the big roan thunder out of the chute. Hammer head buried between his knees, the horse had sailed up into space and had hit the ground slantwise. And at the second terrific leap, Sam Ward was no longer on top. Unhurt, the buster got up, grinned gamely and joined his comrades.

Pick-up men spurring in fast, caught Sleepy Jack before he could exhaust himself; before he even "began to unwind" as one waddy put it. The grandstand was on its feet, roaring. But these cheers were for the horse, not for the rider:

"Oh, you Sleepy Jack!

"What a bucking horse!

"Let's see someone ride him."

"Give him to Gillispe!"

This last brought a hand and a hundred voices shouted. "Yes, let's see Gillispe ride Sleepy Jack."

Tip Randall pinched his chin, his gaze on Bart Gillispe who had turned Rowdy into one corral and was now standing near the chute looking at the big

roan horse. In the champion's eyes there was something besides admiration for a real bucking horse, and Tip was certain he knew what that something else was. It was fear. Bart Gillispe wanted nothing to do with Sleepy Jack! So the announcer's words must have been reassuring:

"Nothing doing, folks. Each contestant has drawn the horse he is to ride and we can't change the rules. Sorry. Who's the next bronc rider?"

Tip Randall had forgotten his own bitterness. He was once again his own natural self, enjoying the show and enjoying life, highly keyed, yet outwardly composed. Happy lights were dancing in his brown eyes and he was smiling as he looked down at old Fred Harlow who'd moved over to speak with him.

Harlow was slapping his lean thigh, pleased as Punch. "Son, told you I had a hoss in a million! Worst of it is, Sleepy Jack ain't mine."

"Not yours, Fred?"

"Nope. I jus' borrowed him for the show. Was he mine I could retire—rich. Only—shuckins!—I wouldn't sell 'im!"

Tip thought, "So he doesn't own Sleepy Jack! And even his saddle is hocked, so he told me."

Another rider was doing his stuff, a mediocre rider on a poor horse which nevertheless jolted and bounced the man all over the saddle. Bob Stillings, coming in to the chute as the whistle blew, grinned at Tip and said, "Is nobody going to make a winning ride? I'm wishing you had a chance, Tip."

"So'm I! But—" Tip paused, for the announcer was booming:

"Fred Harlow—'Old Grandpappy,' we call him—on Stemwinder. Coming out. Give him a hand, folks."

A half-hearted cheer followed and some unfeeling voice from the audience bellowed, "Aw, give us some action. These old pensioners got no business trying to ride broncs."

Stemwinder flashed out into the bright sunlight, and dust churned up under his pounding hoofs, half obscuring horse and rider. Even so, Tip Randall could see that Fred Harlow was in trouble. His head was bobbing as if it was set on a hinge; he was high out of the saddle, taking terrific punishment. All tense, Tip watched and wished he was out there in the arena on Rowdy so he could help the old hand the instant the whistle blew.

The horse sunfished right, then left. Up in the air he went, up and up, swapped ends and plummeted back to earth. He'd shaken Fred Harlow loose. For a fleeting moment the man's body floated in space before it hit the ground with a sickening thud.

Tip was off the fence and running; Bob Stillings was ahead of him. The arena manager flung out of his saddle, bent over the still figure; straightened and waved his hat, beckoning the ambulance.

It wheeled up to the injured rider and helpers placed the man on a stretcher. Stillings was looking at Tip, concern and sympathy in his eyes. "Want to go with him to the hospital?" he asked.

"Nothing much that I could do for him there," Tip answered breathlessly. "But here—it just might be that—" he stopped. Was the plan now taking shape in his mind feasible? Would the arena manager approve?

The ambulance vanished through a gate and the audience coming out of its horrified silence, made itself heard once again. A cowboy near the chute said, "Poor old Fred, all smashed up. And he ain't got a thin dime."

Another voice, the smug voice of Bart Gillispe, answered, "That's his hard luck."

Tip, glancing sharply at Bob Stillings, saw how this callous remark aroused rage in someone besides himself. The anger which flashed across the arena boss's strong face did not immediately fade away. With a comprehending look at the cowboy he said tartly, "What's on your mind, Tip?"

"An exhibition ride on Sleepy Jack after the contest. An exhibition ride for a purse—a big purse—to go to Fred Harlow." Tip's words ran together. "Alone, I can't put it over. But you—"

Stillings' hand fell on Tip's shoulder. "I'll put it over. I'm starting to do it now! Better get out of the arena, cowboy. Bart Gillispe's coming out of the chute on Bearclaw." He swung to his saddle, loped to the grandstand and dismounted. Then Tip lost sight of him.

The crowd was still and tense, watching Gillispe. Tip turned to see the flashy rider, a colorful figure

in gay white Angora chaps, pink shirt and huge, unsoiled white hat, making a spectacular ride. A beautiful ride as well, for Bearclaw was a spectacular horse. Like the man in the saddle, he seemed to know how to put on a great show.

To the audience this appeared amazing, wonderful, thrilling. But Tip, much closer to the bucking horse than those spectators, saw things they did not. Bearclaw was dead easy to ride! Although he went high, he wasn't sunfishing, he wasn't swapping ends or hitting the ground with that stiff-legged back-breaking jolt of the real buck. He was hitting the ground limber-kneed. Any cowhand could have ridden Bearclaw.

Toot of the whistle announcing the end of the ride; two pick-up men crowding close to Bearclaw; Gillispe slipping easily from his saddle across the rump of one pick-up man's horse to land on his feet, put on his hat, and then take it off again as he bowed to the cheering crowd.

As the cheers rolled away, Tip heard Gillispe say, boastfully, "That's showing 'em! Again I've cinched the championship."

Fury moved in Tip. Smug conceit always burned him up. He hoped mightily that Gillispe was wrong about the championship. But there were only two more busters in the competition and when they had ridden, the judges talked together less than three minutes before summoning the announcer.

"Ladies and gentlemen, Bart Gillispe wins first

money and the Antlers championship. Hub Bartly second."

Tip was now back on the fence near the saddling chute; other cowboys were waiting nearby, and a little apart from them Gillispe. He strutted out a few yards, quite prepared to acknowledge a salvo of cheers, but, strangely, there was no great demonstration. Bewildered, obviously angry, the man stood waiting while from the grandstand a stentorian voice rolled out across the arena:

"Bring on Sleepy Jack! We're honing to see that horse ridden. Tell 'em about it, you announcer."

Gillispe turned furiously to the other punchers. "What's all this? Any of you know?"

His reply came from the megaphone man: "Ladies and gentlemen, and all of you cowboys! As most of you know hats are now being passed to make up a purse in order that you may see a ride on the famous bucking horse, Sleepy Jack. This is to be an exhibition ride, and the purse for old Fred Harlow who was injured a short time ago. We promise an exciting ride, so please give liberally—"

Enthusiastic cheers drowned the rest for the idea had taken like wildfire with the audience. Voices shouted, "We're digging deep! Let's see Sleepy Jack ridden."

Others called, "Pour him out! Let's see Gillispe the champion ride Sleepy Jack!"

Tip was watching the champion whose face turned white and then red. For he was on the spot and he

knew it. He must ride Sleepy Jack or take the only alternative—an alternative Tip didn't believe any real man would take.

Already cowboys had run back into the corrals to bring out Sleepy Jack. Bob Stillings dashed across the arena from the grandstand, pulled his palomino up short and said matter-of-factly:

"Of course you'll make this exhibition ride for Fred Harlow, Gillispe? Shall we announce it?"

"I've done my stunt," the champion spoke with brittle emphasis. "Besides, there's nothing in it for the rider. Not a darn cent."

Stillings looked at the man and right on through him. Cowboys near the champion moved farther away. In the ensuing strained silence Hub Bartley, the second money man, said regretfully, "I'd take it on, Bob, but I can't set Sleepy Jack. I ain't that good."

Bob Stillings lifted his eyes, his gaze flicking from one face to another until it came to Tip Randall. "'Twas your idea, Tip," he said, "and we've gone too far to back down."

"Ready," said Tip briefly. Every nerve in his lithe, wiry body was tingling, every pulse thumping.

But Bart Gillispe whirled to face him with out-thrust jaw, his eyes like live coals as he snapped, "Your idea, huh? Trying to steel my thunder! I could—" he choked. Then finished, "Well, you won't win any money, so I'll keep your Rowdy horse. You won't be able to buy him back."

Tip bit hard on his lower lip. It was true. There

was no money for him in this ride, and he was going to lose Rowdy. The first didn't matter; it was the loss of his horse that hurt.

He looked at his spurs, tightened the straps, hitched up the belt of his worn bat-wing chaps, and let himself down into the saddle on Sleepy Jack. His left hand gripped the hackamore rein, his right reached up to his hat.

"Pour him out!"

Tip heard Stillings shout, "Good luck!" and then he heard nothing except a thudding hammer of hoofs, one continuous sound roaring in his ears. He saw nothing except his own left hand and the black mane of Sleepy Jack.

Some where down under its contorted, writhing body the horse had buried his hammer head. Tip's gripping legs felt the strength of the animal's bunched muscles; his face felt the fanning of the wind. He and Sleepy Jack were high in the air. They were torna-doing up and up; then they plummeted down.

The shock as they landed ripped along Tip's spine; it set his head to bobbing. But instantly he caught his balance. He'd lost his hat, yet he kept his right hand high. Blood pounded in his ears, in his temples; everything swam before his dizzy eyes.

All the bucking horses he had ever before ridden were skim milk to dynamite in comparison with the big hammer-headed roan. Even while he was being torn to pieces he thought, "No wonder Gillispe got cold feet!"

His muscles felt as if ripped from his bones. How long could he stay? He drove his spurs home, hanging on, hanging on. His right hand came down, desperately reaching for the saddle horn. But a lucky turn of the horse gave him a break. Once again he felt firm and the hand jerked up without touching leather.

There was dust in his nostrils and he was feeling deathly sick. But he must ride out this cyclone, for the audience and for old Fred Harlow. He must! But his strength was gone, and—

As if from a long long way off he heard the whistle; a horseman whose teeth shone white through a dust cloud loomed up beside him. A hand reached for the hackamore rope, and then, not knowing how he had gotten there, Tip found himself seated on the rump of Bob Stillings' palomino.

His ears were ringing and the whole world was spinning. He couldn't even hear the audience. But he did hear Stillings say, "Listen to that crowd! Cowboy, you did it! Your ride's made 'em rip-roaring mad."

Tip's head began to clear. At last he heard the thunderous salvos and one powerful voice yelling, "Oh, you bronc rider! Out-champed the champion. What a glory ride!"

"Glory ride," thought Tip, and he was all warm and happy inside. "Why, that's what it was. A glory ride."

He hadn't paid attention to where Stillings was

going. But now he saw they had reached the gate at the arena's far northern end. Someone was trying to go through the gate when the arena manager stopped him.

This someone, who wore white chaps and a pink shirt, was riding a little bay horse, which had belonged to Tip. He was saying harshly, "Get out of my way, Bob Stillings. I'm dragging it."

"But not on that horse," said Stillings.

Coming suddenly back to the world of realities, Tip drew a deep breath and said, "But Rowdy is his, Bob. I—I can't buy him back."

"Yes, you can," came Stillings' gruff answer. "I took it on myself to sell that dud Gillispe traded you to a freighter for one hundred bucks. You'll have to give him a bill of sale. But here's the money. Seventy-five dollars right, Gillispe?"

The champion muttered something under his breath. Then he reached for the money, stepped down from Rowdy's back, uncinched his saddle and stalked away, carrying it across his shoulder.

A lump swelled up in Tip's throat. He looked at Stillings and choked, "You'll do to ride the river with!"

"Thanks, Tip," said the arena manager. "I didn't do anything. But you— . . . Suppose we take the purse to old Fred Harlow. I want to see his face when I tell him how you won it—for him!"

S T E P H E N
P A Y N E



Mustang Kid

AGIN my better judgment I put this kid, what the rannies promptly nickname Cow Lick, on the W Triangle payroll.

The play comes up thisaway.

I'm foreman of the W Triangle and for a long time have been figgerin' somethin' orter be done with a couple hundred head, more or less, of wild mustangs that graze on "Long-way-between Flats." That hunk of range got its name 'cause it's along ways between water holes—too far atween for cattle to graze it much.

Since the hosses ain't got any brand, who owns 'em? The answer is that the cow outfits closest to Long-way-between Flats do. The Jim Crow outfit's home ranch lies adjacent to the flats, so they're closer'n we are, but there's only us two spreads to consider. "Bird" Sackman, who owns this layout, calls his brand a Bird. But us W Triangle boys call it a Crow, and call Sackman's outfit a Jim Crow outfit.

Wal, I leave the big boss hisself, A. H. Winters, and my waddies a-gettin' a pack outfit and a bunch of saddle ponies ready for to go out on a horse round-up and jog over to talk with Bird Sackman. A shifty-eyed, long, empty-lookin' hombre, this Sackman, what'd skin a louse if he could sell its hide and what'd fry a flea if he could get any tallow out of it. He don't ask me to light off and have supper, but comes out in his yard to gas with me. His half dozen cow-crammers come outa the bunkhouse and surround us to see what's goin' on.

"You want us to throw in with you, Pete," sez Bird, "gather them mustangs, split 'em fifty-fifty and each outfit slap its brand on its bunch?"

"Uh-huh. Be fair, wouldn't it?"

"Oh, sure," agrees Bird. "Since them horses is mavericks they belong to the first man that gets his iron on 'em."

"Yep; but if some rank outsider—a professional horse hunter—would come in here and grab 'em, we'd have a kick coming."

"Sure we would," sez Bird. "But kickin' wouldn't do us no good. Them mavericks belongs to the man or outfit that brands 'em, and anybody that hollers after they're branded hollers too late."

"I know that. We'll whack 'em up among the W Triangle and the Crow outfits. Course we'll give all the waddies a couple of good ponies apiece outa the herd."

"Fair enough," allows Bird Sackman. "But we can't

help you round 'em up. Too busy. Them cayuses ain't worth nothin' nohow. Go ahead and gather 'em all if you want to, Pete."

"All right," sez I, kinda gruff, feelin' puzzled and s'picious. 'Taint like Bird to pass up nothin' where there's a dollar to be made. I turn my pony when one puncher sings out:

"What the heck's this somethin' a-comin' on a lame, old flea-bit hoss?"

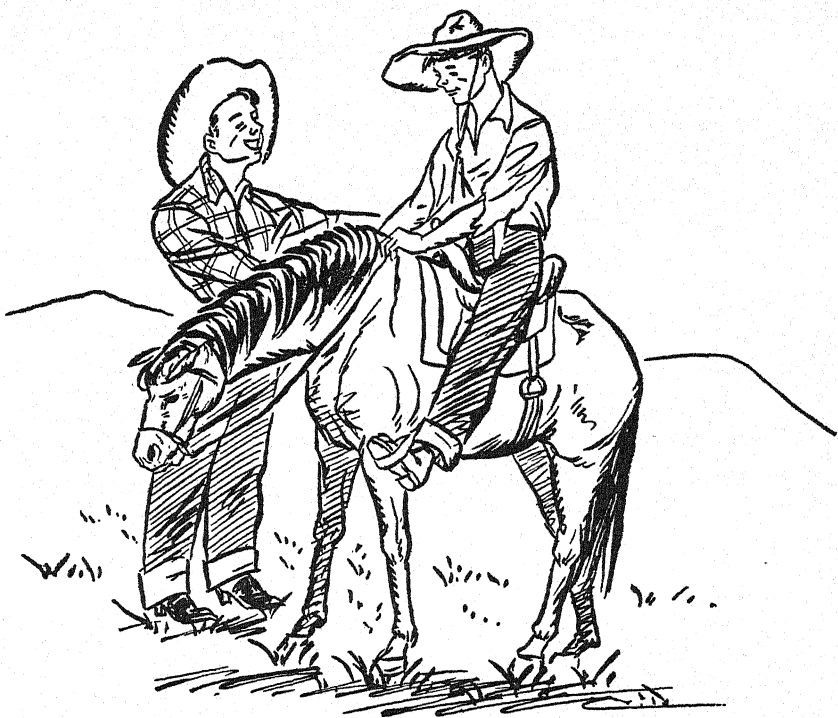
"'Somethin's' right," pipes up another ranny and guffaws at a husky kid, with more freckles on his round face than there are thorns on a jumpin' cactus, who rides up.

He's on a lame, old, flea-bit hoss all right, his saddle older and more used up than the hoss. A gunny sack partly stuffed with somethin' is tied behind the saddle. The kid's rope is a "dish-raggy" picket rope. His duds is in rags, and he ain't got no boots nor spurs—jus' a pair of wore-out shoes—nor a gun nor belt. The thing on top of his head looks like it might ha' been throwed away by a sheepherder who wasn't particular where he throwed it. But this newcomer has a wide mouth and a cheerful grin and a pair of friendly gray eyes.

"I'm lookin' fer a job as a cowboy," he says.

"What?" Sackman grunts, while his punchers looks the kid over and chuckle like somethin' awful funny has hit 'em.

"I dunno much about cowpunchin', but I want to learn," sez the kid. "Mister, I'll work for—"



Sackman hisself sneers. His waddies guffaw. Suddenly I'm a little warm under the collar. The kid colors up to match the flaming sunset on the far western range where old Sol is paintin' a gorgeous scene with his giant brush, though he has dropped behind the jagged peaks hisself.

Them Jim Crow rannies begin throwin' wisecracks and dirty digs at the kid, gettin' him frustrated in just a second. Sackman interrupts the sport to tell him he'll give him a job at cowpunchin' if he can make good.

Them rejoicin' rannies take that poor younker to

the corral and make him show how he can rope. He can't rope a-tall. But nobody could do much with that limber picket rope he has.

"I practised a lot afore I left home," sez the fussed kid, "and I done better'n I'm doin' now."

They razz him unmerciful about his horse and his outfit. The kid don't know what to do or say. A puncher lopes out to corral some ponies, so the Jim Crows can see how the greenhorn can ride. Meanwhile them rannies say they'll initiate the newcomer by givin' him a good "chapping" (turning the victim over a pole or barrel and whipping him with a pair of leather chaps).

This is too much for me. "Lay off!" orders I, and the Jim Crows see I mean it.

Soon a buckskin hoss is roped and saddled for the kid to ride. I figger he ought to set this stove-up nag, what I know can't do nothin' but crow-hop a little. At any rate, I don't interfere, for if the kid has the right stuff in him he'll at least do his darnedest to ride the hoss.

But the younker balks. Won't go near the hoss. Won't say anything, jus' shakes his head: "No!" Maybe he's too scairt to talk. Some of them jeerin' rannies are for puttin' him on the old pelter anyhow and makin' him take a tumble, but Sackman roars:

"You pore, iggerant, yellor sap! Get off my ranch!"

Lordy! how them fellers do taunt this kid as he climbs onto his own plug and moseys off, his head hangin' and his whole attitude that of a whipped

dog. He seems to be headin' my way, so I trot up alongside him and note the heartbroken look in his eyes.

"You ain't one of that outfit?" he asks husky.

"Nope. You couldn't insult me worse'n to call me a Jim Crow. Where you goin', kid?"

"I dunno. I ain't no place to go. Ain't no money. Ain't et since yesterday."

"Why didn't you get on that hoss?"

"I sure wanted to, but I jus' couldn't. Was so scairt I was kinder paralyzed. I guess—" a gulp, "I know I'm yel—"

"Don't ever admit that to yourself nor to nobody else, kid!" I cut in. "You come along with me to where my outfit'll be camped on Long-way-between Flats. You'll get ten dollars a month as a starter."

"Do you mean you'll hire me?" Tears of gratitude is in that boy's eyes.

"Ye-ah, and quick as you l'arn a little somethin' I'll give you more money. . . . Kid, you got a whoppin' big fight ahead of you—to whip that yeller streak. How come you're so doggoned scairt?"

"I dunno, 'less it's 'cause I've been bucked off and hurt bad a few times. Once in a wild horse race at a rodeo. I guess I hadn't ought to try to make a cow-hand when I'm like I am, but—"

"But you're goin' to make good," sez I with a confidence I ain't feelin' noticeable.

I know the hard-riding, reckless, nervy riders of the W Triangle ain't goin' to take kindly to this mis-

fit, and if they find out he ain't got no sand— Huh, life'll be a heap less pleasant to him than to a chained wildcat. Furthermore, A. H. Winters will probably give me thunder for adoptin' the waif, as it were.

Winters would ha' tried to round up the mustangs before this, only they're known to be so gosh-awful hard to corral. A hoss hunter tried gettin' 'em oncet, with no luck. Said hunter built a set of good corrals on the flats at Lone Tree Springs, and as them corrals is still there we're aimin' to use 'em. But the hunter didn't have near enough saddle stock to gather them broomtails. Since the Jim Crow outfit refuses to throw in with us, I'm wonderin' if we're goin' to have cowboys enough. We poke plenty fun at them Jim Crows as bein' mail-order cowboys and plumb useless buckaroosters what can't pack saddles to real hands like us W Triangle waddies, but, though I never admit it out loud, nor do my rannies, I know plenty well how the Jim Crows are mighty efficient cowboys.

They got ropers who showed up our best lariat tossers at the rodeo in Buffalo, one of our ropers bein' yours truly too. They got a couple of bronc stoppers that ask no odds nor favors from any riders in the West, and their Twister Dort won at that same rodeo over our top man, Alec Holt. That's one reason we don't cotton to the Jim Crows, but bein' good sports we ain't riled so much about their beatin' us as about the underhanded tricks they pull off. Bird Sackman's a slippery cuss and crooked. He can figger out more ways of slippin' over somethin' shady—not

quite so shady as to call for gun play—than a happy-go-lucky cowboy can figger out alibis for havin' got drunk in town and failin' to show up for work.

Me and the kid reach Lone Tree Springs, where my outfit's got camp pitched with the remuda grazin' close by. A fire blazes bright. Two punchers are busy makin' supper. The rest, all except the hoss jingler, are loungin' round the fire, and here's the big boss hisself.

"'Lo, Pete," he sings out. "The Jim Crows going to help us?"

"Nope."

"You said 'nope'? That's funny. Never knowed Bird Sackman to miss a chance to feather his nest."

"Winters, I'm s'picious of ol' Bird Sackman an' his flock."

"So'm I," returns the boss, and several rannies echoes his words. "But he can't do nothin' to queer us this time," Winters adds, and noticin' the kid with me, asks, "Who you got there?"

"A young man I stumbled onto. I thunk he could rustle wood and flunky round camp; maybe cook, since we ain't brought no cook."

Winters sizes up the kid and frowns. "You hired this boy, Pete?"

"Uh-huh."

"Wal, it looks to me like somebody ought to open that ornament you carry round on top of your shoulders and see what's inside it. You do get the damnedest fool ideas."

After that dig, uttered in front of all the rannies and the kid, it's only natural if the boys don't take kindly to Cow Lick. They greet him with nothin' but silence and I know he feels like a house-raised dog left out in the cold on a stormy night. He ain't one of the boys, no, sir. But at least he gets a square meal under his belt; and I let him sleep with me.

Next mornin' we're astir long afore daylight. There are six punchers, countin' the jingler, the High Man and myself, makin' eight. This ain't countin' my new hand, Cow Lick, who, Winters sez, we'll leave at camp to herd the cavvy and have dinner ready for us when we get in.

Naturally the boy don't like to be left outa things and of course the way he'd been ignored from the moment he hit camp hurts. He sez to me, when I rope him a nag to ride:

"Pete, is there any way I can make good?"

"You just keep a stiff upper lip, younker, and do your darnedest to dig up some of that stuff knowed as sand. Don't ever let on to these W Triangle boys you're scairt. Make 'em think you're jus' one bundle of grit and you'll come out all right."

"You think I will?" eager.

"Heck, I know it. Kid, you're all right!" emphatic. Too emphatic, if he had noticed it, for I ain't no confidence that he'll come out all jake.

"With you believin' in me, and with all you're doin' for me—" he begins, but I cut him off.

"Now, Cow Lick, you saw how this camp is about

a mile east of the big corrals and outa sight of 'em?"

"Yes."

"That's so them wild broncs won't see the camp. They're s'picious of everything. So'm I s'picious. S'picious of the Jim Crow outfit. So, every once in awhile durin' the day I want you to jog up to the brow of the hill there and take a look-see. Them Jim Crows might come and tear out a panel of fence so when our mustangs popped into the corral they'd go right on through it. That's the kind of underhanded outfit them Jim Crows are."

"I'll sure watch," sez the kid, and gets onto the hoss I'd caught for him. That old pony knows a green horn has climbed him, so he ducks his head and pitches the kid off, flat on his back.

Three-four of the rannies bust out a-laughin', but I run to Cow Lick and pick him up. He gasps, "I can't ride that horse! I—I can't even get on him again."

"Shut up!" I hiss. "Grit your teeth and double your fists. Walk right up to that old crowbait and snarl: 'Yuh lousy cross atween a mud turtle and a barb-wire fence, I'll whip your eyes out.' Then pile right on him and belt him with your quirt like you mean business."

Cow Lick looks into my stormy eyes and he steps up to the hoss what one waddy has caught. "Yuh lousy cross atween a mud turtle and a barb-wire fence. I'll whip your eyes out!" sez the kid.

His voice is shaky, quavering, but Johnnie Frost,

holdin' the hoss, thinks it's because he's mad. So Johnnie yells, "Thataboy! Climb on."

And Cow Lick climbs on. He slaps that hoss with the quirt, which so astonishes the wise old nag he forgets to buck any more. I see Cow Lick gazin' my way, his eyes just a-shinin', and for the first time I have hopes he may snap out of it.

The Long-between Flats run north and south. We'll handle the southern end today. It's where the corral is located. So about midway across the flats from east to west I string out four riders—each with two extra ponies which they tie in places where they'll be able to get a quick change of mounts when they need 'em. These four are to turn the wild horses when they come sweeping up from the south.

The rest of us also leave extra ponies at vantage positions on the east and west sides of the area to be worked. Then we ride clear to the southern extreme of the flats and spreading out far apart start to work back. Course as we ride south we sight several little bunches of mustangs what run at sight of us, but as we don't light in after 'em they're content to get on top of the highest hills and watch us.

But when we start north and line out after the cayuses they sure bust away in earnest. I'm forkin' a mighty good horse, but I can't any more'n keep in sight of the wild critters, to say nothin' of headin' 'em. But the punchers strung across the flats do stop the mustangs and turn 'em back. 'Tain't long afore all the small bunches have fused into a big one, running

in a huge circle. The herd tryin' to break away towards the east is met by a couple of riders who turn 'em south, and, relievin' the punchers who're hot after the herd, run it as fast as their nags can go.

When the wild broomtails think they're goin' to escape to the south a couple more men bob up and head 'em west. Here too are riders to meet and bend 'em. The punchers on fagged mounts drop out and change while those on fresh ponies chase the mustangs. We're doin' what they call "relayin' 'em," and we've got the herd goin' in this huge circle with two punchers foggin' 'em all the time.

Tough on saddle stock, I tell you. On any horse round-up you'll run the tail off your saddle horse; rounding up *real* wild ones is ten times worse. But excitin' no end. Some of the boys get some terrible spills. Four times them horses all but break past our riders and get through our circle to where there'd be no headin' 'em, because no puncher followin' the herd can ride fast enough for that. Our circle tightens up and we get the mustangs going round and round in a smaller and smaller area. Get 'em wore down and winded, too, until a rider can get within fifty feet of 'em and a comparatively fresh saddle pony can outrun 'em.

This along about two in the afternoon, and all our saddle ponies are far from fresh. Course, those we'd ridden first has had a chance to rest while we was ridin' others. My saddle is soaked plumb through with sweat. I never rid so hard in my life, but victory

is pretty near. The mustangs are in terrible distress. Colts, cripples and older hosses have dropped out by dozens. Why wouldn't they be in distress? Since dawn they been running like the mill-tails of hell.

I give the signal agreed on to whoop 'em to the corral and whoop 'em we do. Down the flat we come; four riders behind the herd; two on one side, two on the other, holdin' them straight. It's a spectacle as we sweep towards the corral. Cloud of dust behind; din of thundering hoofs on the hard ground. Flaring nostrilled horses, tails and manes flying, bodies stretched out as they race onward.

The wise old leaders of the herd, seein' the wings of the corral, make a last frantic effort to avoid it. Snap of ropes and of six-guns, yells, as we head 'em and send 'em hurtling through the gate which slams shut behind 'em. We've got 'em! Nearly a hundred head of unbranded horses. We know how worthwhile the chase has been. Plenty young horses that'll make first class saddlers; mares that will be fine breeding stock. Good stuff, these wild horses, and they now belong to the W Triangle. Tomorrow us exultant punchers'll round up the upper half of the Long-way-between Flats. But we'll take more saddle horses and we'll handle our relays better than today. Right now we want some dinner—bad.

But when we jog over to camp we find dinner ain't ready. Cow Lick ain't even got a fire. Watching the round-up from long range, then watchin' the herd sweep towards the corral, he'd been so excited that

he'd completely forgotten any duty, other than keepin' track of the small cavvy.

The punchers are all hot, tired, hungry. Winters himself is pretty near all in from the terrific riding. So he's plenty cranky 'bout no grub bein' ready, and he never was a mealy mouthed hombre. How he does wade into the poor kid, fairly singein' his ears with his remarks. Cow Lick can't say nothin', nor can I.

We pitch in and get a feed ready and gobbled up. Then our jingler goes out to bring in all the saddle ponies we'd left strewn round the range hither and thither, and the rest of us go over to the corral. Our cavvy not seemin' to need any watchin' I tell Cow Lick he can come along. But the other rannies and the boss don't even speak to the kid. Strikes me he's havin' a tough probation with this W Triangle.

Every puncher is going to ride a bronc immejit. So we run one of the wild little fighting mustangs into a round corral, rope him by the front feet, down him, hackamore and saddle him. When he gets up there's a cowboy on his back. Whereupon the bronc bucks, kicks, squeals and fights, wildly, while the rider gets cheered or hooted by the rest of us. They're snaky, them mustangs, just quicker than small trout flashin' through clear water; and darned hard to sit. But everybody, except Winters, has got to ride at least one. Gee-whillikers! we're havin' fun—cowboy fun.

I pick out a sizeable roan and ride him, though I

have to pull leather. Then I take a seat on the fence to watch Kent Hobson ridin' his selection. He gets throwed, and picks hisself up hollerin', "If I was bustin' bronses I'd fix 'em so they wouldn't buck. I ain't no bronc fighter."

Here's somebody on the fence beside me—the kid, askin', "Can you fix a horse so he won't buck?"

"Wal, to a certain extent," sez I. "You can ride him with one front foot tied up and he can't do much, but when you let him have the use of that foot he's sure apt to explode. I've seen fellers tie one hoss to a bronc's tail and when the bronc'd start buckin' the hoss tied to its tail would rear back on the lead rope, naturally, and that'd hold the buckler down. Some use overchecks to keep a hoss's head up, but they ain't very satisfactory. Others has a puncher snub their bronc to a saddle horn and get along pretty good. But when the bronc what's snubbed up and bein' led is turned loose, why, he'll come uncorked—if he's got it in him. The best way of breakin' hosses, kid, is to ride 'em free, and be able to stay on top no matter what they do. Howsoever, if you was right up against it for a mount and had nothin' to ride but a hoss you knew blamed well you couldn't ride, you could tie an old cowhide, a sack, or just a rope, to his tail and chances are, he'd be so darned scairt of that thing draggin' behind him he'd not have time to pitch and buck for runnin'. Ye-ah, he'd just burn up the earth tryin' to out-run the thing draggin' behind him."

While I been gassin', our bronc stopper, Alec Holt, has frontfooted a sizable black with a funny white streak on its rump. The other boys help Alec get the saddle and hackamore on; Holt gets set, and they let the hoss loose.

"Go high, Patch!" hollers Holt. "Man on you!"

That Patch pony goes up and knocks a couple clouds outa his path to the sky; then comes back and tries to drive hisself and his rider through the earth. Here's a hoss what can buck. The rannies settles to attention. Alec Holt has already settled to business. His dusty face looks desperate, like he knows he's more horse under him than he can ride. The cayuse just wipes up that corral and at its seventh jump Alec bites the dust. Patch dives at the thrown man with teeth bared and front feet flashin'. But a rope drops round its neck, quicker than you can wink, and three punchers drag back the mad bronc.

Alec Holt gets up, kinda shaky. "How'd Patch do it?" he wants to know. "Bucked so darned fast I couldn't keep up with him."

"Tie that pony to a post in another corral," orders the big boss. "We'll get him thoroughly halter-broke. He's worth real money as an outlaw, by Georgel"

"Don't anybody want to ride him?" asks Alec.

Nobody does nor does Alec want to tackle the cayuse again himself—yet. He'll ride Patch later, he sez.

"Your turn, Cow Lick," hollers Johnnie Frost. "We'll saddle this little white-eyed blue for you."

I glances at the kid settin' aside me on the fence. He's turned kinda pasty round the temples, and now without a word, he gets down, swings onto his jingling pony and starts out towards camp.

"Hey, where you goin'?" Come ride your hoss!" Johnnie yells.

"Got to look after the cavvy," Cow Lick returns, and keeps ridin'.

But the cavvy don't need no lookin' after. In plain sight over to the east of the corral, the saddle ponies are grazin' quiet enough. I know what ails Cow Lick and feel disgusted. No use tryin' to do nothin' for that yellow jasper. He's the only one of us—except Old Man Winters, who ain't supposed to fork wild horses—who ain't ridden or tried to ride at least one bronc. The rannies sure tell him about it. Where he'd met with silence last evenin' he's now met with sarcastic, bitin' remarks.

I don't come to his rescue any. I'm through with the poor misfit. He'll never do in the cow country. But at that I don't send him away.

Comes the dawn of another day, and we leave the horses we have gathered penned in one corral while we go out to make the final haul—if we have any luck. Expectin' a tougher day than yesterday and needin' more changes to relay those wild broncs, this time we take all of our broke saddle ponies. Accordingly, Cow Lick has no cavvy to herd, but I leave him in camp just the same with advice to keep his eye on the corral as he did yesterday. Some time

durin' the night his old crippled gray had left our W Triangle ponies—maybe the jingler who was night-hawkin' let the plug go just outa orneriness—so Cow Lick has no horse to ride, unless he rides a bronc.

"I'm terrible 'shamed 'bout yesterday evenin'," he says to me. "But after Alec gettin' piled I jus' couldn't—"

"I know, kid," I interrupted. "But don't you get discouraged. You've done a heap towards conquerin' your lack of sand. You're comin' fine," tryin' to cheer him up, he's so doggoned down in the mouth it's pitiful. "I still believe in you," I ramble on glib. But I don't believe in him. I know I've hired a counterfeit. "You try and have dinner for us today, kid, and watch them horses in the corral. They're worth money and we worked mighty hard to get 'em. There ain't no brands on 'em yet, and was somebody to beat us to brandin' 'em, I dunno as we could make our claim stick."

I don't really think that Jim Crow outfit will try and grab the mustangs we've gathered or I'd sure leave somebody besides Cow Lick at camp. But in full force to the corral an hour after we've gone and are out of sight, come Bird Sackman and his cow-crammers.

Cow Lick has no gun, but he backs up against the gate and defies Sackman to open it. This defiance brings a horse laugh from the Jim Crows. Just to show what good ropers they are, a couple of 'em drop their loops on Cow Lick and drag him, none too gentle, out to one side.

"Forman Pete o' the W Triangle shore left *some* man behind to guard them cayuses, didn't he?" snickers one.

The kid's so red-hot mad he can't even cuss.

"We're goin' to brand all them maverick broncs with the Bird," the other ranny tells him. "Then jus' let your outfit holler their heads off. 'Twon't do 'em no good. The outfit as hot irons these broncs fust, owns 'em."

Sackman hisself had gone into the corral where the black bronc, Patch, is tied. Startin' to untie the hoss the Jim Crow owner gets knocked down by a pair o' wicked hoofs.

"We won't bother with this man-eater," he bellers, pickin' hisself up outa the dirt.

Few minutes later the Jim Crows are whoopin' the ga'nted, thirsty mustangs southwest towards the Bird ranch. They've got all but one—Patch, tied to a post in another corral. But they're satisfied that Cow Lick will never attempt to ride that hoss. The kid is turned loose and the rannies what roped him lope out after the others.

Cow Lick gazes after horses and riders vanishin' in a dust cloud over a hill and he swears a man size oath. Noticin' the hoss left behind—Patch, the man-eater—he grits his teeth, clenches his fists and snarls: "You lousy cross between a mud turtle and a barb-wire fence. I'll whip your eyes out!"

His words has as much reference to Bird Sackman as they have to the bronc and he keeps repeatin'

others along the same line while he gets his dishraggy old rope on that mustang's front feet and ties him so he can saddle him.

"I'm goin' to make good," he grits. "Goin' to show all the ornery cow wallopers I ain't no yellor counterfeit. I got to make good, 'cause foreman Pete believes in me and he sure has treated me white."

He saddles Patch, and with a piece of rope ties a slicker to the mustang's tail. He fixes reins to the hackamore, blindfolds the horse, releases the front-foot rope, opens the gate, mounts, and cuts the rope which holds the horse to the corral post. Then pocketing his knife and jerking off the blindfold, Cow Lick pulls leather with both hands, holding on for very life. But he is too mad to be scared, and Patch doesn't buck. No, indeed. When that slicker rattles close to his heels he fairly quits the earth, sailing out through the gate, almost flying after the dust cloud kicked up by the mustangs Sackman had stolen.

Cow Lick don't want to follow the herd. He wants to find us W Triangle punchers and tell us what had happened; but he has no control whatever over the horse. Uselessly he tugs at the hackamore reins and does everything in his power to turn Patch. The mustang speeds straight on, in its heart terror of that fearful flapping thing at its heels.

Bird Sackman and his waddies are near their ranch when they see horse and rider coming "like a bat out of hell." Evidently that crazed bronc, running wild and blind, will speed right into the herd

and scatter it to the four winds. Two of Bird's cowboys spin out loops in their ropes and throw at the black mustang as he passes. Both miss, and into the bunch thunder horse, rider and bouncing, rattling slicker. Pandemonium! Terrorized mustangs stampede in three directions at once. But they're tired and thirsty; the Jim Crow men are mighty efficient cowboys on good ponies. Back into one bunch they whoop the horses, whoop 'em as well as the kid on his mount into the corral at the Bird ranch. Then they're able to rope Patch and with Cow Lick still on his back lead him into a separate corral.

"Huh, you wouldn't fork a buckin' hoss for us, but you now seem some bronc fighter," sez Bird.

"Yep, I'm a bronc fighter," growls the mad kid. "I ain't scairt of no horse living."

"Just what'd you figger you could do, follerin' us?" Bird asks.

"Aimed to show you ornery jaspers I was a first class rider," returns Cow Lick, thinking fast. Here he is among the Jim Crows, virtually a prisoner. He must save those mustangs for the W Triangle. He'd seen us boys ride mustangs yesterday and thinks now perhaps the Jim Crows can be induced to ride wild horses. If only he can get them all mounted on mustangs at the same time they'll be helpless—just as he had recently been—not able to control their mounts.

"I can outride any man you've got," he states, and jumps off the black, which is so spent it offers no ob-

jection as he unsaddles it and unties the slicker.

"I still doubt if you can ride in a bed wagon," replies Bird. "But after we brand we'll show you how we can set 'em—not before. You tied a slicker to this critter's tail to keep it from buckin'—an old trick. Can you ride a buckner?"

"I can outride the whole bunch of you," bellers the kid. How can he get all those Crow punchers mounted on mustangs at the same time? A sudden inspiration. "Tell you what, all of you," he shouts. "I know how to control a bronc better'n any of you. I can beat you all in a wild horse race."

"You beat us in a wild horse race?" It's Twister Dort, huge, raw boned, aggressive—the Crow bronc fighter who'd won a championship over the W Triangle. "I got fifty dollars sez you can't. Let's have a wild horse race, Bird. It'd be a heck of a lot of fun."

"'Twould," chimes in another puncher.

"Ought to brand, pronto," sez Sackman. "Once we get our irons on these horses they're our'n."

"Them W Triangle goats won't be back afore three or four o'clock 'safternoon, if then," remarks Twister. "Poor idj'ts, doin' all the hard work, and us gettin' the hosses without no work to speak of. 'Twon't take long to run a wild horse race, Bird. Got any money, kid?"

"Nope. Wish I had a thousand berries to bet you. I can beat all of you."

The other punchers hooraw him. But they also clamor for the race. They're anxious to try out the

mustangs and see if they could ride 'em. Bird reluctantly consents.

"You ride, too, Bird," said Twister, "but we'll make some rules of our own. We'll saddle all horses in the corral and all of you can get set but me. I'll open the gate and swing on. We'll run the race up as far as that creek yonder, turn and come back. First man inside the corral on the return wins. Suits you, bronc fighter?" to Cow Lick.

He nods. "I'll win," he states positive.

Into one corral the Jim Crow men turn their gentle saddle ponies, carry their saddles into another. Cow Lick does the same. One by one wild horses are roped, brought into this corral, saddled, hackamored and blindfolded. Cow Lick gets a small dirty-gray animal, notes carefully where bridles, which ain't being used in this race, has been dropped when the gentle ponies were turned loose, and hopes no more saddle ponies are in the barn.

He is saddled and ready as soon as any of the others, for now through some inexplicable reason—perhaps because the emergency is so great—he, a green kid, must alone save these mustangs for the W Triangle—he no longer feels fear of horses. His heart pounds, but outwardly he's cool, alert, wary.

Twister Dort fairly drags his mount up close to the gate and shouts, "Get set, boys!"

He opens the gate, and leaps to his saddle. The corral is filled with kicking, lunging, squealing horses, and shouting men. Chaos. Each man knows only

what he alone is doing. Out of the corral sweep the Jim Crow men, Twister in the lead, lining his bucking mount out towards the creek.

He looks around for the cock-sure kid, and doesn't see him. Here are all the Jim Crow cowboys, some going one way, some another, but all mounted, even to Bird Sackman himself. But where's the goofy kid? Twister sees him and yells an alarm, trying to stop and turn his mount. In the confusion Cow Lick had instantly jumped off his wild mount and taken his saddle with him. Into the corral containing the gentle ponies, he had sped, had bridled and saddled one, and opened the gate leading into the corral where the mustangs were penned. In among them he had whooped the gentle ponies, before throwing wide the outside gate. This is what he is doing when Twister sees him.

A second later out stream the wild bunch, and with them the gentle Jim Crow ponies. The kid with a rope lashes them all, whooping 'em back towards Long-way-between Flats. Into this bunch of galloping horses quite naturally drift those animals the Jim Crow men are riding. Not one of them is bridle wise. The riders have no more control over them than Cow Lick had had over Patch.

Cow Lick sees punchers doing their best to stop their mounts, gallops up behind and smacks 'em. Twister Dort jumps off and, letting his bronc go, runs madly back towards the barn. Two other punchers follow his example. Bird himself, black with fury,

curse above the rumble-rumble of hoofs. The exultant kid glances apprehensively back toward the barn, where Twister and two other men are shaking their fists at him in impotent fury. Evidently no horses were in the stable. They'll have to wrangle on foot before they can get mounts.

Now the entire herd, lashed by the kid, who rides back and forth like a wild man, sweep eastward across the hills, Sackman and three other punchers carried along with it on the broncs they ride. But Cow Lick isn't obliged to try and corral the bunch all by himself.

From long, long range, us W Triangle waddies had seen the dust cloud when Sackman had taken the mustangs, and divining what was going on we had come back a-foggin'.

A mile west of the corral, we meet the kid and the horses, the Jim Crow men among them, and we whoop Sackman and his three punchers on into the corral, where we let them get off the wild ones and try to explain the how-come.

"Aw," growls Sackman. "I'd just as well come clean. We tried to put one over on you, hombres, and that kid put one over on us." He tells what Cow Lick had done.

Frank admiration is in the eyes of all the W Triangle boys as they gaze at the ragged, freckled kid. Winters himself rides to Cow Lick and grasps his hand.

"I was mistaken 'bout you. But Foreman Pete sure knows a hand in the makin' when he sees one."

"'Twas Pete as started me on the right track," sez the kid looking at me with somethin' in his eyes what kinda brings a lump up in my throat.

"Sackman, get your saddle ponies outa our bunch and get outa here," growls Winters. "Let this be a lesson to you. We'll let this be known all over the county and you'll get punished plenty. Ye-ah, you and your waddies'll get hoorawed for the next two years about the kid who got you all onto wild ponies and stole back the herd you'd stole from us! Get goin'!"

And we all give 'em the horse laugh as they ride off, plenty humbled you bet.

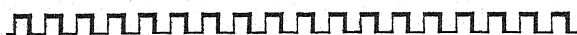
Cow Lick moves over beside me. "Pete, between you and me," he says, and gosh but that boy's happy! "I've licked somethin' a lot harder to lick than Sackman."

"Ye-ah. I know what you mean," sez I. "I'm proud I know you. The way you made monkeys outa them Jim Crows—" A satisfied chuckle. Then, "Son, every W Triangle man gets two ponies outa this wild bunch for his own private hosses. You can pick 'em first."

"I'm takin' Patch as my first choice. And I don't think he'll even buck with me."

"Ho, kid," calls Johnnie Frost, "you done been accepted by this outfit as one of us. And we figger the first monicker we gave you ain't no wise appropriate any more. You're now Mustang Kid!"

S T E P H E N
P A Y N E



The Horse and the Wrangler

THIS evening young Harry Morgan had as usual brought in a Lazy A cavvy, and had bunched the horses against the corral rope running out from the near front wheel of the Lazy A chuck wagon.

Harry had a loop opened in his own lariat, and the loop with the coiled rope hung loosely over his saddle horn ready for instant use. This because this rather chunky, earnest horse wrangler with the steady blue eyes was quite aware of the tricks of one particular horse in the cavvy.

Harry had however momentarily forgotten to keep his eyes on the hammer-headed roan, Torpedo, nor was he watching as closely as he should the open side of the rope corral which the wrangler was supposed to guard. With his wide blue eyes sparkling, Harry was watching the cowpunchers leave the herd of

cattle they had finished working and turned loose, and race pell-mell to camp.

Punchers and horses were coated with dust and sweat. But boy! How they rode. Though he was only a horse wrangler now, Harry would someday be one of those "regular waddies."

Pulling up short, as close to the cook's fire as possible, without scattering dust and dirt over old Beef-and-Beans Bill's outdoor kitchen where Dutch ovens and other pots simmered on the bright wood fire, the cowboys stepped down from their mounts. Stripping saddles and bridles from the tired, sweat-streaked animals, they came running toward the cavvy with ropes in hand, to catch fresh horses for use on night herd.

Never yet had Harry had the great experience of "singing to the dogies" on night herd. What a thrill among other thrills this would be when he became a real cowpuncher. When he would ride night herd.

On a sagebrush bench north from the camp the Lazy A wranglers could see the herd of cattle thus far gathered and held on this roundup. Riders were lazily circling the animals and bedding them down for the night. Nearer, much nearer, Harry sniffed hungrily the savory smell of beefsteak sizzling in the hot Dutch ovens, of smoking hot biscuits, of boiling coffee.

Mighty nice to be on the roundup at all, Harry was thinking, even if a fellow's only the day wrangler. Some good scouts among those dusty, whisker-

stubbled waddies who, with spurs jingling on their high-heeled boots, were running stiffly toward him and the waiting cavvy.

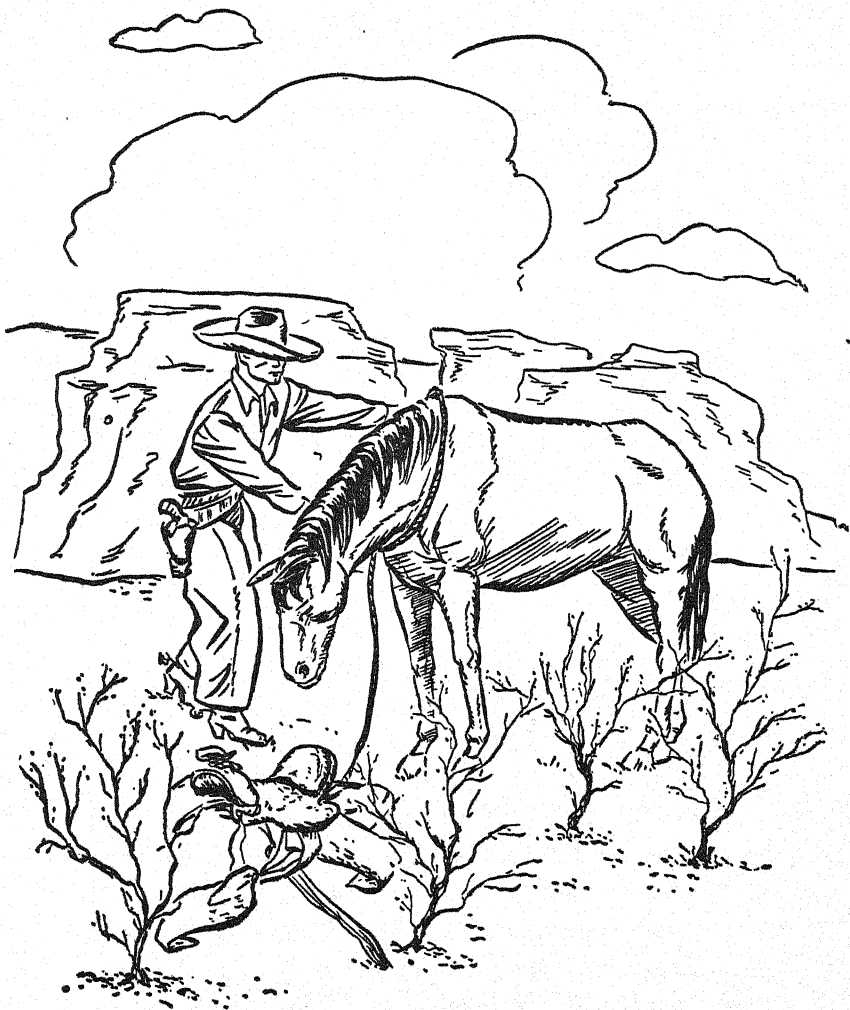
Cactus and Happy, Slim and old Tapadero, for instance. They were good eggs, if they did razz a new hand something fierce. As for Lant, the roundup boss—real name Lem Graves but commonly known as “Lant,” short for Lantern, because there was a saying, “Swap your bed for a lantern when you go to work for old Lant Graves of the Lazy A”—he was all right. A cowman, you bet, but cranky and rough spoken sometimes.

Of all the crew Twister Hardin, the bronc buster, was the only hand Harry Morgan didn't really like. Twister was too rough with his horses, and—well, he was “pretty ornery.” Someday, when Harry felt surer of himself and knew more, he'd—

As if shot from a gun, out of the cavvy all at once raced a big strawberry roan horse. The wrangler saw its hammer head, its little ears laid flat against its poll, its wicked shining eyes as the animal flashed past. Too late Harry snapped out of his day dreams. Snatching his lariat he made a wild, desperate throw at the fleeing horse—the bunch quitter named Torpedo.

As the throw missed by a good ten feet, the voice of Tapadero at Harry's left jeered, “Split another loop!” Then a big voice, the voice of Lant Graves, roared:

“If you'd been mindin' your job the hoss wouldn't



have got past you, Button! Asleep again! And after I've warned you. Twice we've had to run down a couple of good saddle horses to bring back that bunch quitter. This time you'll go get him yourself."

Harry, who was drawing in his rope, felt his face

grow hot. Three times before this he had stopped Torpedo's breaks for freedom. But Lant seemed to remember only that twice the horse had escaped, and had led top-hand cowboys a terrific chase before they brought him back.

Three other cowboys had added their razzing comments to those of Tapadero and Foreman Lant before Twister Hardin, the big, swarthy, pugnacious bronc buster, put in his say. Hardin had already roped his night horse, and he now looked up from cinching his saddle to snort:

"Aw, heck, Lant, send a man after the bronc. This two-bit kid won't even get within gunshot of him."

He swung swiftly to saddle and prodded his fresh mount savagely with his big wheel spurs, which so astonished the pony that it promptly started bucking. By sheer brute force, Twister Hardin yanked up the animal's head and sent it racing away after the flying Torpedo.

Meanwhile Lant Graves had shouted, "Stay right here, Twister! When I told Harry to get that horse I meant it. Show me you're some account, Button. Bring back that outlaw—or I'll fire you!"

But if Twister Hardin heard the foreman's words, he failed to heed them. He was speeding after the runaway outlaw, westward up a deep draw. In his wake rode the Lazy A wrangler, his eyes bright and hot, his mouth strangely dry; hurt, humiliated, stung by the cowboys' taunts and Lant Graves' sharp rebukes.

If he failed to bring back Torpedo he'd be fired. Fired! Nor was this all. He'd be the laughing stock of the Lazy A cowpunchers, those rollicking, good-natured fellows who razzed a fellow unmercifully, yet withal were good scouts. How Harry wanted to make good with them and with old Lant. But real cowboys had little patience with a man less efficient than they were themselves. If the wrangler failed now— He clicked his teeth and made ready his rope.

A wooded, rocky hill at his right flew past; a sage brush slope at his left was just one grayish-brown blur. Ahead of him, Twister Hardin's mount, filling the narrow cow trail, kicked dirt back into Harry's face and eyes. He must get around that swash-buckling rider.

Why had the bronc buster butted into this anyhow? Was it because Torpedo had been in Twister's string? Did Hardin now feel responsible for its return to the cavvy?

Harry Morgan had seen the husky, dark bronc buster ride Torpedo a few times and how the horse did buck! Though that seemed not to bother Twister greatly, nevertheless he could not tame Torpedo. At the end of a day's ride the outlaw was as wicked and rebellious as ever.

Furthermore, so unreliable and treacherous was Torpedo that his rider was of no use on the roundup. He couldn't be depended on to head off a bunch of cattle or even to help hold a bunched herd. Torpedo was apt at any moment to "come undone" and rip

through a bunched herd, pitching and squealing, scattering it four ways at once.

Then suddenly Twister Hardin had ceased to ride the big hammer-headed roan. No other cowboy had shown any desire to take Torpedo into his string, and Harry had heard Slim and Breezy and Tapadero say:

"A hoss like that, as can't be broke, ought to be turned loose with the wild bunch or else kilt dead."

Nevertheless Torpedo had remained in the cavvy, a trouble maker, a bunch quitter.

All of this flashed through the wrangler's mind as he fed his little gray the steel, pounding after Twister Hardin, with Torpedo away ahead of both riders up the draw. Why hadn't somebody killed that outlaw before now? Why should Foreman Lant want a horse that was no good, a trouble maker, brought back to the roundup? A trouble maker? Torpedo had very successfully put Harry Morgan in a mighty tight spot!

The little gray swerved slightly to the right, leaping up alongside Twister's desperately running black. The bronc buster flashed a sardonic grin at the wrangler's set face and yelled,

"Say, you're ridin' a streak of lightnin'. But your saddle's loose."

Saddle loose! Harry had realized this a moment ago when the gray had cleared a small washout. A man riding with a loose saddle should never rope any large animal. But Harry couldn't stop to tighten his cinch now. He must, he would catch Torpedo. Ahead

of him the big roan was traveling like a comet, yet Harry's little gray was narrowing the gap between.

Already Twister Hardin had dropped far behind. Out of the tail of one eye however the wrangler saw the bronc buster still coming on, and was glad of it. He might need help. He might need it badly enough to be glad even of Twister's help.

The roundup camp with its friendly fire and the tarp-covered beds scattered all about; the cavvy, the chuck wagon, leathery old Beef-and-Beans Bill busy over his pots; the rannies staking out their night horses and then eating their supper, all had passed from sight five minutes ago.

Now at last Torpedo was out on an open sagebrush benchland, and Harry Morgan was creeping up on the flying outlaw. Far away yonder the mountains lifted their great bald ridges into a sky all yellow and gold with the sun's passing; and in the twilight stillness the thudding hoofs of racing horses made drumming music.

Harry straightened his rope. He was gaining on Torpedo. The exultation of victory surged high within him. He'd win! He'd bring back the horse, and thereby save his face and his job. Should he tie his rope hard and fast to his saddle horn? That would be safest. Otherwise he might lose the rope and thereby lose the roan outlaw. Deftly, and without slackening speed, he half-hitched the end of the rope around his saddle horn.

He could hear the harsh roar of the gray's breath-

ing. He could feel the sweat of the laboring pony ooze up through his saddle. Torpedo's pounding hoofs kicked up dust, making the big roan appear a huge, dark body floating on waving dust billows. How the two horses were running!

Harry's loop circled above his head. He leaned forward and let it fly through the air. For a breathless moment it seemed as if the noose would miss its mark. But no! Over the hammer head it floated; back onto the roan's great shoulders. Then, as it had been trained to do, stopping and bracing itself the instant the roper made his throw, the little gray horse planted all four feet against the dark earth and squatted like a rabbit.

Narrowly the rider escaped being hurled over his pony's head. In the next sliced second before the rope snapped taut Harry dug in his spurs, hoping to make the gray leap ahead, in his mind the sickening thought of his loose cinch.

But the gray pony heeded not the jab of spurs. Snap! The rope jerked taut. Eleven hundred pounds of speeding horseflesh at one end of it, a small pony braced at the other. Instantly the gray was yanked forward ten—fifteen feet, its hoofs plowing dirt and sagebrush. Torpedo seemed scarcely to feel the strain. Forward and onward he lunged while the loosened saddle slid up onto the gray's neck. Harry shouted something—he knew not what except that it was wild and despairing—as over his pony's head caromed the saddle, carrying the rider with it.

An instant later the astonished gray had jerked its front feet clear of the cinch, and Harry Morgan and his saddle plunked down to earth. There Harry stayed. But not the saddle. On across the prairie, in the rapidly gathering darkness, sped the roan outlaw. Thirty feet behind him bounced a saddle at the end of a rope.

Sitting up groggily, his face bruised and smeared with dirt, his shirt half torn from his body, the Lazy A wrangler watched Torpedo vanish over a low ridge. A moment too late the young fellow scrambled to his feet as his own gray pony snorted, whirled and took up its back trail. Harry's mind was clearing, though his body was one great ache from head to heels.

He rubbed dirt from his smarting eyes, and his gaze focused upon Twister Hardin drawing rein near by. The bronc buster had made no effort to catch the gray pony, nor was he spurring on after Torpedo. His eyes shone through the dust mask on his hard features as he grinned at the discomfited, disgusted, bruised horse wrangler.

Harry Morgan stared, for the man was strapping his rope back on his saddle.

"Well, you shore took a spill," chuckled Twister. "Hope it larnt you somethin'."

The wrangler found his voice high and sharp with pent-up anger: "Why didn't you catch my gray? Ain't you goin' on and get Torpedo?"

Twister shook his head with a brittle laugh which

infuriated the younger man. "I'd have picked up the li'l gray," he said. "Only it belongs to the Lazy A outfit. I allowed you'd not want to come back to the roundup empty-handed—and get fired."

Harry's eyes blazed. "So *that's* how you figured! What about Torpedo and my saddle?"

Twister shifted a little sideways and coolly rolled a smoke. "That snaky cayuse ought to have been turned back to the wild bunch long ago. Can't be broke, he can't. Let him go, say I."

"But my saddle!"

"Huh! I suspect Torpedo'll wear it and the rope out after awhile and get rid of 'em. Well, I got to be gettin' to camp to put on the nose bag. Walkin's good in 'most any direction, ex-wrangler."

Dizzily, Harry lunged at the man. He wanted to fight, useless as it would be when Twister could flatten him with one blow. But the bronc buster had seen the fire in those blue eyes. He whirled his black and rode away, sending a parting taunt before he was out of earshot:

"Real cowpunchers always make good at the job they tackle. Always get what they're sent after. Fella, it just might be, with that saddle trailin' and scarin' him half to death, Torpedo'll start runnin' in circles."

He was gone, and the velvety darkness of night closed down around Harry Morgan, alone on the vast rangeland. He sat down on a sage brush, too angry

and too miserable to think. The friendly stars came out of hiding and winked at him. Their light spread across the great reaches of this lonely, lonely land, and a night hawk, winging high above the baffled Lazy A wrangler, sang its plaintive, changeless song. Far in the distance could be heard bawling cattle; cattle bunched by the Lazy A roundup on this day now ended.

This day now ended! The last day Harry Morgan would ride for the Lazy A. Or would it be? What was that sound over yonder to the west? A sound which buoyed the wrangler to renewed life and renewed hope. It was the thumping hoofs of a running horse.

Had Twister Hardin spoken true, that Torpedo might now run in circles? Those hoofbeats seemed to indicate it.

Harry sprang to his feet, forgetting his aching bones and muscles, forgetting also the emptiness of his stomach and the dizziness that at times assailed him, and walked westward across the great plain.

"Cowpunchers always get what they're sent after!"

An ornery jasper, that Twister Hardin. Mean, too, or at least he'd have caught the gray pony. But, darn the fellow! He had spoken the truth, not once but twice: Once about cowpunchers, once about the outlaw horse.

Torpedo, scared half out of his senses by that flopping, trailing saddle which followed him everywhere he went, was indeed running in great circles.

Yet run as he would, kick and fight the rope and that terrible thing pursuing him, he could not escape from it.

Harry tried to follow the frantic horse when it passed close to him. But he could not keep Torpedo in sight. The roan's endurance and wind seemed incredible. But now the game began to have zest for Harry Morgan. If only he might somehow, on foot and without even a rope, catch Torpedo and return the horse to the roundup! He'd do it too!

Three long hours later he almost succeeded. No longer hearing the beat of chudding hoofs, he came upon Torpedo, facing the trailing saddle, head down as if watching a mortal enemy.

Harry could not see the sweat on the roan, but he could smell it; he could hear the horse's rasping breath. Torpedo must be run down, winded, played out. But when the wrangler ventured closer the animal snorted, and again tore away through the darkness.

It seemed no use to try to catch the horse yet something deep within Harry would not let him even now give up. Daylight was streaking the eastern horizon when once again he drew close to the halted roan. The winded, exhausted, hollow-flanked outlaw stood now with sides heaving and head bowed quite to the ground.

As the wrangler approached, Torpedo lifted his hammer head. He looked at this man creature with misery and despair in his heretofore flashing, savage

eyes, and voiced a low, choked whinny. He stepped out toward Harry, then stopped and turned his head toward the object which had so relentlessly trailed and tormented him the whole long night.

A lump swelled into Harry's throat. Stroking the horse's out-thrust muzzle, rubbing him gently behind the ears, he promised softly, "Just trust me, old boy. I'll get you loose from that terrifying thing."

After Harry had untied the rope from the saddle—a saddle which by some miracle could still be used—he made a rope hackamore on Torpedo's head and led the horse around in a short circle. When the roan saw he was no longer being trailed he rubbed his muzzle against the wrangler and with a great thrill Harry understood that for the first time in his life Torpedo had made friends with a man.

Though Harry had neither saddle blanket nor bridle, neither particularly mattered. He saddled the horse, fixed reins to the hackamore and swung up. Torpedo humped his back and squirmed, but when the rider spoke to him reassuringly he looked around as much as to say, "Oh, it's you? Then everything's hunky with me."

Harry Morgan was more than thankful that it was not over five miles to the roundup camp, for Torpedo was very, very tired. Not more tired than his rider, but Harry had something to make him forget weariness and hunger and thirst—success!

Breakfast was over, and the cowboys had roped and saddled their circle horses when Harry rode

confidently into camp. All eyes were on the dusty rider and the hammer-headed roan as Harry reined up to confront Foreman Lant Graves.

Followed a breathless hush as the cowboys, all eager to begin talking, waited for the foreman to speak first. When Harry Morgan's gaze flicked toward them he saw their grins, their shining eyes. He saw Twister Hardin, the swarthy bronc buster, grinning more widely than anybody.

Lant said, "You sure took time enough to get that hoss back here, Button."

Then his wind-puckered eyes narrowed. For Harry had stepped down from the saddle and Lant Graves was noticing, as a trained range hand would notice, how Torpedo looked at his new rider and acted towards him.

"But," the foreman resumed, "I see you done some-thin' besides just bring back that old bunch quitter. You've broke him to ride. Okay, Harry, Torpedo's in your string from now on. Get you some breakfast and go to work."

"You're puttin' Torpedo in my string! Well, that's—" Harry's voice trailed off.

Lant was looking at him oddly. "There's jus' one thing more. How you feelin' about what Twister done? You and him goin' to get along?"

"That's O.K. with me, too, Lant. You see, I was mad at him, but I got it all doped out now. He wanted to see if I had grit enough to try to get Torpedo, even when it didn't seem I ever could catch the horse."

"Grit enough, eh? That's as good a way of puttin' it as any, Harry. By the way, you make good wranglin' the rest of this roundup and I'll put you to punchin' cows steady."

Just then the morning sun came swelling out of the far plain to eastward, its bright face no brighter or more shining than the cut, bruised, dirty countenance of the Lazy A wrangler!

S T E P H E N
P A Y N E



Flying Hoofs

SHORTY Bill Egan
said, "Relax, Jim! Relax!"

Jim Starr, with a brief smile which lighted his lean, sun-browned face, answered, "Don't worry about me."

But his nerves were pulled tight; he was as tense as the most nervous of all the relay race horses now making their appearance on the track here at the Fall City Rodeo.

Out in the arena, the calf roping was still going on full tilt, and the huge audience in the packed grandstand was lustily cheering a lucky contestant who had tied his calf in sixteen seconds flat. This rodeo possessed more color and movement and excitement than a three ring circus.

Arena manager Jack Carver promised, "a thrill a minute," and yesterday's Cowboys' Relay Race had proved the highlight of the great outdoor show. In showmanship, in chills and in thrills, this event had

surpassed even the bronc riding. The great audience had simply eaten it up.

The memory of yesterday's race was still vivid in Jim Starr's mind, for on this, the opening day of the rodeo, he had made his first bid for fame at a major rodeo. The blond young rider had already ridden Shorty Bill Egan's string to victory at a dozen small town rodeos. Here at Fall City, however, he had found himself in professional competition, pitted against the world's most expert riders at this specific kind of racing, as well as against faster horses than his employer's relay string.

In yesterday's race, Jim had suffered the humiliation of coming in fourth and last. Oh, he had seen the records hung up by the Dreyer and Harbin string and by the Dennison outfit, yet he'd been kidding himself along he had a chance until yesterday's race had opened his eyes. Jim knew that of the four strings entered today, Shorty Bill's was the least likely to win. Even with good luck he could do no more than tie for third place with the Frade string.

Small wonder Jim was nervous. He marvelled that his employer could be so cheerful and optimistic. Shorty Bill—the man stood six feet five in his bare feet and had a fog-horn voice—had assured his rider, "In any relay race the speed and skill of the man in the saddle is more important than the speed of his horses. The fellow who can change saddles from one mount to the next, get mounted and off ahead of the

other fellow, is one who'll win. There's always the breaks of the game too."

As far as Jim had seen, there had been no lucky breaks yesterday. The Dennison outfit, ridden by Dick Yates, had fed the Dreyer and Harbin string dust, and plenty of it.

Curt Dreyer, last year's winner, had been pretty sore about it, but in sharp contrast to Curt's sullen attitude, Starr had enthusiastically congratulated the winner. "Dick, if I could ride and change saddles like you, I'd win with a bunch of saw horses. Man, you were right there!"

Dick Yates, a lanky, dark beanpole, limber as a cat, had grinned his appreciation. "If you'd had my horses, Jim, Curt Dreyer, the rotten sport—would have taken your dust, too."

As Jim stood now beside Shorty Bill, holding the three restive Egen ponies in the place allotted to them at the north end of the grandstand, he missed the dark, beanpole rider. Yates' helper was in charge of the Dennison string, and neither Dick Yates nor Dennison was present.

At the far south end of the stand, the Frade string was in its place, and now young Curt Dreyer and his black-browed cowboy helper came riding past Jim and Shorty Bill. Curt, small of frame and wiry, with pinched features, opened his too-tight mouth to say mockingly, "Look, Blackie! What you suppose that pair's doing on the track? You s'pose they're going to run those plow horses in the race?"



Angry glints showed in Jim's blue eyes. He saw Shorty Bill's huge fist clinch and heard the man growl, "Plow horses! Why, the swell-headed wise guy! Being winner at a half dozen big rodeos this year, it sure rubbed Curt sore when Dick Yates took that fall out of him yesterday. Jim, they say that pair'll do anything to win. Hope you take him down a peg."

Jim would have liked nothing better than to make Curt Dreyer eat crow. But Curt's horses had lightning in their legs and only Dennison's had the stuff it would take to win over Curt Dreyer's.

Without answering, he gazed bleakly out across the arena. Dust was lifting in the still, hot air from the spot where a contestant had roped and tied a calf, and arena manager Carver, in huge white Stetson and gay, pink-striped shirt, astride a beautiful palomino, was a bright patch of color against the dull brown of the soil.

Carver was heading toward the race track and running along beside him was Yates' boss, George Dennison. They passed through a small gate and drew up before Shorty Bill and Jim, and Carver said, "Bill, Dennison's in a jam!" The big man's voice was taut and harsh, and he mopped perspiration from his strong, square face. "Dick Yates was taken sick mighty sudden. He can't ride today!"

Dennison took up the story. "I've just come from the hospital. The doctors say Dick's got appendicitis. I asked Carver if another rider could be found. No luck. Relay race riding is a mighty special kind of riding."

Shorty Bill turned to throw a look at the place now occupied by Curt Dreyer and Blackie and the three horses of the Dreyer and Harbin string. "'Appendicitis?'" he rumbled. "I'm wondering if maybe those two birds somehow managed to give Dick a case of ptomaine poisoning!"

Jim drew in his breath and held it. If his employer was right— Sudden fury sizzled inside him. But Dennison was shaking his head, and Carver snapped, "Keep your shirt on, Shorty Bill. This is just a bad

break for Dick and for his boss. There goes the loud-speaker calling the relay race. Dennison, I don't know of a rider who can pinchhit for you. You'll have to cancel—"

Jim Starr's right hand vised his employer's shoulder. "Shorty Bill," his low words tumbled over one another, "I think you know as well as I do that we can't win. If you'll say the word I'll ride Dennison's string!"

Dennison's face lighted like the moon swelling out of the Wyoming prairie at dusk. Shorty Bill's mouth fell open. He was a half minute grasping exactly what Jim had suggested. And in the interval the loud-speaker was booming:

"On the track. On the track! Second heat of the Cowboys' Relay Race. Yesterday's race was a scorcher, bringing the entire crowd howling to its feet. Today's race promises more excitement, thrills galore. If Dick Yates wins today, he'll have the prize in the bag.

"But if Curt Dreyer wins, the race'll be tied in a knot, and tomorrow'll be the big day for settling. . . . The Cowboys' Relay Race! Shake it up! Shake it up!"

The audience gave a lusty roar and then settled into a tense, expectant silence. Jim Starr had Curt Dreyer in the corner of his eye, and he could have declared he saw triumph in the fellow's pinched face. He thought grimly, "Curt knows Dick Yates is down on his back. He thinks he's got this race on ice. If only I can upset his apple cart!"

Dennison was saying, "Shorty Bill, if you'll let Jim ride my horses, I'll—"

He got no farther before Shorty Bill said tersely, "Cancel my entry, Carver, and lope across to the judges' stand and tell that announcer what to say. Just a second! There's no rule against substituting a rider at the last moment?"

"None," snapped Carver. "Why not ride your string yourself, Shorty Bill?"

"Huh? I never thought of that, but I'll do it. Send a cowboy to help me, Carver. I'll get razzed plenty by the crowd, but I can take it. Jim, listen to everything Dennison can pour into your ears in thirty seconds, and then ride his string—to win!"

Jim was tingling from light brown hair to the tips of his toes. He scarcely heard what Dennison was telling him about Rowdy and Banjo and Pat, the three horses he was to ride, for the audience was stirring like a great restive animal, and there were shouts of, "What's the delay?" "Where's that thrill a minute?" "Get the race going!" spicing the air.

Carver was speeding across the arena to the judges' stand. He spoke to a cowboy and the cowboy raced to join Shorty Bill. Dennison and Jim Starr were now with the Dennison horses, where Andy Boyne, holding them, welcomed Jim with a handclasp. "Should have your own saddle," he suggested.

Jim looked at the cinch on Dick's racing saddle. "I fasten mine the same way Dick does," he said. "I'll make out with his saddle." He stepped up into the

saddle on Rowdy, the brown pony, and moved out to join the other contestants lining up for the starter's signal—Curt Dreyer, Tom Frade, Junior, and Shorty Bill.

Curt's face turned red. Then it turned white, and strained like a latigo tightened by a rider. "What's this mean, hick?" he demanded, sourly.

Carver was again on the race track, and the loud-speaker silenced the audience which, having noticed the change of riders, was beginning to demand an explanation.

"Attention, please! Dick Yates has been taken ill. Jim Starr, pinch-hitting for Yates, will ride the Denison Stables horses. . . . And, oh, yes! Shorty Bill Eagan, riding his own, 'll show 'em how it's done. Shorty admits he tips the scales at two hundred and fifty pounds!"

Laughter rocketed through the audience, relieving for a moment the high tension that had crept through it. An expectant hush then fell over the crowd. Carver was lining up the riders for the start, and Curt Dreyer was jockeying to get the lead. But much of his earlier tension had gone out of Jim Starr. Now that he was mounted and feeling out the brown streak of lightning between his knees, he was cool, assured and confident. He even laughed as he saw Shorty Bill beside him, the big man so oddly out of place among these young, lithe, light-weight riders in brilliant cowboy shirts.

"Get back where you belong!" snapped Carver to

Curt. And then with the suddenness of a pistol shot, he yelled, "Go!"

They were off! Bright splashes of color streaking around the track. Shorty Bill was so far to the rear that Jim lost sight of him at once. But ahead of him, crowding the pole, rode Curt Dreyer, and forging up alongside was sturdy Tom Frade in a billowing blue silk shirt.

Locked in a close bunch, these three passed the eight mile pole. Wind fanned Jim's cheeks and whistled in his ears. He felt the brown pony under him had power in reserve and he did not crowd it until Curt's horse ran wide at the halfway turn, which was, he thought, a break. Instantly, Jim shot his own mount into the space by the pole.

He had won the coveted position, but Curt Dreyer, using his quirt with savage violence, threw his mount over against Jim's, forcing Rowdy into the fence. Flimsy boards shattered as eight hundred pounds of racing horseflesh struck them and instantly turned a somersault.

Hurtled out ahead of the falling horse, Jim landed, miraculously, on his feet. Through a fog of dust he saw Tom Frade sweeping past, followed closely by Shorty Bill. He heard Shorty Bill's great voice shout, "I saw it. . . . You hurt?"

"No," yelled Jim, and as Rowdy scrambled to his feet he was up in the saddle. Apparently none the worse for the terrific spill, Rowdy cleared the low fence in a beautiful leap, and with ears flat to his

poll, stretched out his neck, swinging back into the race and giving his all with a gameness which won Jim's admiration.

Oddly enough, he wasn't thinking of the foul trick Curt Dreyer had pulled. He was thinking that a rider couldn't let down a horse like Rowdy. Rowdy of the fighting heart was zinging past Shorty Bill.

What was this? The home stretch already? The grandstand, splashed with color, was on its feet, sending ringing waves of cheers into the still, warm air.

Rowdy was running neck and neck with Frade's mount, and Jim reckoned those cheers were for Curt Dreyer, far in the lead, winner of this first lap. Even as Jim swerved his well-trained horse to the right, heading in to the spot where the other horses of the Dennison string waited, he saw Curt leap from his horse and, saddle in his arms, run to his next mount, which the black browed cowboy called Blackie was holding. It took Curt only a split second to saddle. As he bounced up on the pony's back, Blackie yelled something to him, but what it was Jim could not hear.

Jim was slapping his saddle onto his second pony, Banjo, a sleek sorrel, held by Dennison himself. Under its tan, Dennison's face was white and his eyes shone oddly through the dust. "Hurry, Jim! Hurry!"

But Jim was taking time to fasten his latigo securely. Experience had taught him not to take chances on a turned saddle. He gave that latigo strap

a powerful tug, wrapped its end around the saddle horn and then, without touching stirrup, he was up. Instantly the sorrel was gone like an arrow from a bow.

Curt, fifty yards ahead of Jim, was trailed closely by Tom Frade, for Frade, too, had made record time in changing from his first mount to his second one. Of the four contestants, Shorty Bill alone had fumbled his saddling, for Jim heard a voice boom from the audience:

"Look at that old cowboy! What business has he along with those limber-cat boys!"

Dust, fogged up by the riders ahead, blurred Jim's vision. The raw smell of sweating horseflesh, was in his nostrils. Dennison had said, "This sorrel's got both speed and endurance. Don't spare him!"

Jim dug in his heels and called to Banjo, "Come on! Give it all you've got, fellow!"

The way Banjo responded sent an exultant thrill through the slender rider. Never had Jim Starr ridden such a horse. Banjo wasn't running; he was flying. Jim had the sensation of floating through empty space. Yet under him were four flashing hoofs and a trim, iron muscled body hurtling forward and onward.

Almost as if Tom Frade's horse were tied to a post, Banjo shot past the horse and its rider, and crept up steadily and surely on Curt Dreyer's bay. Curt looked back, and through the pelting dust Jim saw how worried he was. Then, as Curt faced ahead, with

that startling suddenness with which accidents happen, all in the wink of an eye, the fellow's saddle slipped and turned, carrying the rider overside with it.

In that second, Jim Starr realized Curt's left foot was hung in the stirrup. The bay was leaping sideways, trying to escape from the terrifying object now dragging at its heels. In a matter of brief moments only, the man would be trampled and kicked, perhaps kicked to death.

Jim realized this and at the same time realized he now had the race in the bag. No one could or would blame him if he swept on past Curt Dreyer without attempting to help him. And after the dirty foul that Curt had pulled on Jim, in forcing Rowdy into the fence, Curt well deserved this misfortune. He had it coming to him!

All in a second Jim fought a battle with himself, and then he was bringing Banjo up alongside Curt's bay. He caught its bridle, brought both horses to a halt, and with marvelous skill freed the saddle cinch.

As Curt Dreyer and the saddle slipped away from the badly frightened horse, Tom Frade flashed past this stalled pair. His face was tight and grim, and his eyes said, triumphantly, "I'll win this race!"

Jim was off and was helping Curt to his feet. "Able to ride?" he rapped out, picking up the saddle and dropping it on the cavorting bay's back.

"I'm okay," said Curt, with the strangest expression in his eyes Jim Starr had ever seen in a human being's.

It revealed that he clearly realized that Jim had saved his life, yet he couldn't believe a man he had wronged would do such a thing.

"Blackie warned me about that cinch," he began.

"Up in your saddle, man," Jim clicked, and gave him a boost.

As he made a flying mount himself, he saw Shorty Bill, and heard him shout, "I saw the whole thing, Jim. And you sure—"

Jim didn't hear the rest. Banjo and Curt's bay were racing neck and neck around the turn into the home stretch. If the crowd had cheered the first lap of the race, it was now one vast roar. Tom Frade was ahead, and making a swift and faultless change from his second pony to his third and last horse, he was mounted and gone before either Jim or Curt reached their respective changes.

As Jim bounced to the ground carrying his saddle with him, Dennison said, "The crowd's rooting for you, Jim! And how! Hear that noise."

The sound was a din in Jim's ears. He was cinching his saddle on Pat, a slim-bellied gray. He was mounted and off ahead of Curt Dreyer. The wind made a humming sound against his eardrums, he was dizzy and winded and his muscles felt like butter. But as he had never before ridden in his life, he was riding to hold his short lead on Curt, and if possible, to win over Tom Frade.

This horse named Pat was a greyhound, yet Curt Dreyer's mount possessed the speed of an antelope.

It forged up alongside Pat and the two riders rode knee to knee, rocketing onward. And in this brief interlude Jim saw that Curt's sour and contemptuous expression had, in some subtle manner, changed. There was something in the young fellow's hard, pinched face which had not been there until the narrowly averted tragedy of a few moments ago.

Yelling to make his voice carry, Curt said, "I've taken a tumble to myself, Jim Starr. . . . 'Twas what you did in a pinch. . . . You can call a foul on me and put me out of tomorrow's race if you want to."

"Forget it," Jim yelled back. "I know that if you beat me tomorrow, you'll beat me fairly!"

"That's right, Jim!"

Abreast, these two surged into the home stretch. It was Tom Frade's race. In that one half-mile lap, neither greyhound nor antelope could overtake Frade's roan. Yet even so, the three straining horses were almost neck and neck as they shot under the wire. And the roar of wind in Jim's ears was a whisper compared to the roar of the crowd, which was on its feet, cheering itself hoarse. It was not the winner Frade, but Jim Starr the crowd was cheering, as Jim presently became aware, when he heard his name lifted upward toward the blue sky.

"Starr! Starr!" It rolled like thunder across the arena and made it evident who was the hero of the rodeo.

There was a great deal more, but Jim, weak-kneed and winded, found himself with Dennison and Car-

ver and Shorty Bill, who had dropped out after the second lap. He was now thumping Jim on the back, saying in a husky voice, "I'm a darned sight prouder of you than if you'd won, Jim!"

"I'm terribly sorry, Mr. Dennison," said Jim, "that I couldn't—"

Shaky with excitement and deep emotion, Dennison broke in, "Say boy, the crowd saw something bigger than any little ol' race that was ever run. I just know I can tell Dick you'll win for him tomorrow."

A lump swelled into Jim's dry throat. He turned to Jack Carver. The arena manager hadn't said anything. He didn't say anything now; he simply caught Jim's hand and pressed it hard.

S T E P H E N
P A Y N E



Old Timer

WHITEY SLOAN, known as the old timer on the 7 X outfit's range, had rehearsed what he was going to say to the boss. But somehow when he was alone with Bill Dawson in the small office, the words stuck in his throat. Whitey had worked for this grand old man so many years that all his interests in life were tied up with Dawson and the 7 X. Breaking away was . . . well, heaps tougher'n he figured.

He shifted from one booted foot to the other, fingered his thin gray mustache, tugged his droopy old hat down on his bald head, and finally fished a letter from the inside pocket of his unbuttoned vest and shoved it at the grizzled ranchman who was regarding him with a sharp and suspicious interest.

"Read it! It's the second one I've got from ol' Jim. The first set me thinkin'. Jim's got the right idea. This one sort of clinched it."

Bill Dawson scanned the letter and quoted from it:

"I'm living with my daughter, her husband and their kids on a little farm and it's sure an old man's dream.

"You'd love it, Whitey, like I do, and I'm hoping you'll buy in with me."

"This Jim Anson was a riding partner of yours in the old days?" the ranchman inquired.

"That's right, Bill. In them good old days even before I met up with you." Whitey's eyes of washed-out blue were suddenly bright. "Sa-ay, lemme tell you some of the things me and Jim went through together when we was wild young punchers."

"Another time. You're planning to settle down with Jim on a farm? On a farm?"

The pretty speech Whitey had planned was lost as completely as a bronc rider with a loose saddle. "Why, yes," he stammered. "You see, a man's jus' got to stop a-workin' for wages and pitch a camp of his own someday."

He squirmed uncomfortably, for he had helped Dawson build up the 7 X from scratch, and now Bill Dawson's piercing eyes were hard to meet until a smile creased the corners of his firm mouth and he said,

"There's been lots of talk lately about old men 'knocking off to take it easy.' As if that was the smart thing for 'em to do."

"That's right," Whitey agreed quickly. "These yearlings I'm workin' with, Bill, keep remindin' me how ancient I'm gettin' and how I ought to get a



change and some fun before I kick off. That, along with ol' Jim's letters, kinda got me. . . . Not as I really think of myself or of Jim Anson as bein' old. Thirty years ago he got married, and I'd lost all track

of him till his first letter. In it he said he'd lost his wife and had one daughter. This second one told more. . . . Jim and me used to be awful close, Bill."

Dawson nodded. "Have you told the boys you're quitting 7 X?" he asked.

"No, sir!" with emphasis. "I could take their razzin' all right, yet it'll be a heap sight simpler if I dodge it. Curly'd be slappin' his leg and chucklin' fit to bust a rib. 'So cow punchin's a dog's life, Whitey? Reckon there's a heap of dog about you, you've always took to it so strong.' Lot of that sort of stuff, boss. If you'll give me my wages, I'll slip out quiet and you'll tell the bunch 'So long' for me."

Dawson frowned, before he said slowly, "You've got real money coming, old timer, and I'm a bit short, so suppose I give you one thousand dollars now, and after I ship some beef . . ."

"Sure," Whitey agreed briefly.

Some moments later he pocketed a big roll of bills and his voice husked out on him as he squeezed Bill Dawson's hand hard. Turning, he hurried at his rolling, stilted cowboy walk across the dark yard to the stable and led out his own private saddle horse, a leggy roan.

Unknown to the other cowboys and ranch hands, he had earlier packed a war sack with a few precious items and cached it in a manger. He retrieved the sack and tied it in front of his outmoded saddle, behind which slicker and coat were tied. With a queer lump in his scrawny throat and a mist in his

eyes, which he somehow could not wipe away with his bandana, he swung up and prodded the roan out of the 7 X yard.

"Doggonel! If it wasn't for ol' Jim beggin' me to come join him, I couldn't cut 'er. He's plumb right though. Feller my age is 'bout through; got to have a little campin' spot he can call his own home."

The silent stars that had winked understandingly upon the old hand on a thousand different nights while he circled around a bedded herd, now looked austere on the slouch hat and warped shoulders and bat wing chaps of the man riding away from the ranch and range he loved.

The stars were still bright when he took the Indian Trail over the great mountain range. Someday a highway would run here, but now it was nothing more than a game and pack horse trail, yet one to shorten Whitey's long journey to what he called "the Valley," by fifty miles.

By sundown of the next day he had put the smell of wild flowers and of pines behind him; he had put the mountains behind him, and all of the terrain had changed. Here the road ran between wire fences, and plowed fields rolled away to right and left. He saw small bands of sheep, and more hogs and chickens than he'd imagined were in the whole world. He smelled alfalfa and fruit orchards and there was a strangeness about the neat frame buildings. Too darned civilized, and what a gosh awful lot of them!

The horses were all big work teams, fat and strong,

and quite unlike the cayuses cowmen used for saddle stock. The cattle? Small dairy herds, all right in their way, and necessary, too. But to a fellow who never milked a cow if he could avoid it, and had wrangled the wild Texas cattle long years ago and then had seen them grow into the fine beef herds, dairy cows just weren't real cattle.

At dusk he rode into the town of Valley. Following its main street he felt eyes, both of pedestrians and of farmers in buggies and wagons and automobiles, heavy on him. It was as if he was a curiosity, something out of the past. Like an ox team and covered wagon, like a herd of buffalo, like a mountain trapper, like—why, like a cowpuncher of the old trail-driving days—a survivor of an era which in this fertile land was gone forever.

At home he hadn't felt out of place, or out of time, but here he felt acutely selfconscious. He didn't belong!

The roan turned in at a livery stable where the chubby young hostler gave horse and rider a long, appraising stare. Annoyed, Whitey said, "When you get done gawkin', tell me where-at's Jim Anson's place?"

"Anson? . . . Oh! He's the old grandpa who lives with Tom Calloway. Let's see now, where is Calloway's farm? You better stay here tonight and hunt it up by daylight."

"Reckon I had," Whitey agreed. And under his breath, "I got to get used to this and make new friends."

However when he left town soon after sunrise he still felt as lost as a lone steer on a sheep range. He had known this lower country would be warmer than the mountains, but he hadn't expected the heat to sort of wrap itself 'round him. The air, too, seemed to have absorbed all the smells of growing things and to rest heavily on the man and his horse.

Nevertheless, anticipation brightened his leathery face when at last he turned off the road through a wire gate to a set of buildings bordered by shade trees. In the background was an apple and cherry orchard, and there were chicken houses and hog pens, a huge barn and, sho' 'nuff, a herd of milk cows grazing in a pasture Whitey Sloan would have called a good-sized corral.

The frame house had recently been painted, so its white walls and red roof looked mighty neat. A tawny cat fuzzed its tail and scuttled out of sight as if the old timer and his horse were enemies, and a little girl stopped her play with her small brother to stare at him as if he was something from a story book which she hadn't actually believed real until now.

"Hi, kids? Where's your grandpa?" It wouldn't be long now before he saw old Jim!

The girl said, "He's lying down."

"Uh?" said Whitey very sharply. "How come?"

A young woman with something white bound around her dark hair came from the cherry orchard. She was a right-well set-up girl with pink cheeks and

nice blue eyes, and she carried two large baskets of cherries as easily as if she'd been a man.

She looked at the cowman with patent astonishment as he swung down a bit stiffly and advanced with his dust-coated hat in his hand. "I take it you're June Calloway?"

"I'm Mrs. Calloway," the woman said briefly as if to set this stranger in his place.

A little of Whitey's warmth and joy at meeting Jim's daughter went out of him, but his grin didn't vanish. "Happens I'm your daddy's old time partner, Mrs. Calloway. You've heard him talk about Whitey Sloan?"

"Oh! Whitey! Talk about you! I should say he does. He's been hoping you'd come. You'll find him in, through the living room, first door to your right. But don't excite him."

Whitey shuffled into the house, turned through the door at his right, and stopped and stared wide-eyed at the rather fleshy man stretched out on a bed in a tiny, airless room. The man's eyes were closed. He was white-haired, and his furrowed old face had an unnatural color, as if he stayed too much indoors. Jim Anson all right, but gosh! he'd changed! Whitey had been remembering him as of thirty-odd years ago. Now shock ran through him and left him strangely disturbed.

Jim's eyes flicked open and he bounced off the bed and yelled, "Whitey, you old hoss thief! Am I glad to see you. Put 'er there!"

"Same here! How you makin' out, you long-horned son of a coyote?"

For three minutes they loudly insulted one another, and then Whitey asked, "What you layin' round this way for?"

"Aw, just off my feed a little. I'll be hunky now. How you like this place? Look, through this window you can see the mountains. And it's so quiet. Just the place for us to settle down in our old age."

June Calloway's shadow darkened the door and her troubled voice warned, "Daddy, you mustn't get excited."

"Heck! Stop worritin' about what that pill-pusher said, June. Now Whitey's here, I'm rarin' to go. Let's put your horse in the barn and I'll show you 'round."

And with the enthusiasm of a youthful cowboy showing off his new saddle to his comrades, Jim Anson showed his old friend the farm. Alfalfa here, small grains there, vegetables yonder, and of course Whitey had noticed the berry bushes and fruit trees.

Tom Calloway had bought in with Jim when Tom married June nigh six years ago. Tom was sure a hustler. Today he was helping a neighbor, so he in turn would get help harvesting alfalfa, but he'd be home come evenin'. Three years back the grasshoppers had eaten everything on the farm, every danged thing, and was that a socker. It had put 'em in debt all over again.

"Now that's just like the cow business," said

Whitey. "A feller thinks he's got it made, then comes a hard winter or a drought or . . ."

"Yeh, yeh," Jim agreed, and with glowing pride he showed Whitey the chickens and the hogs and the dairy herd, Whitey pretending an interest he simply didn't and couldn't feel. Not yet anyhow.

The men had been closely tagged by the two small children, Myrtle and tiny Jimmy. Their big-eyed wonder and curiosity about the queerly dressed, odd looking visitor had soon worn off, as well as their awe of him. By the time they were turning back to the house for dinner, Whitey had Myrtle's hand fast in his and Jimmy was perched on his shoulder.

The meal over, June, looking still more worried, strongly advised her father to rest. Jim Anson would have none of it. "You want the cherries taken to town. Well, me and Whitey'll take them in and sell them. Take that dry cow which ain't any good and sell her to the butcher, too."

The two men hitched a team to a light spring wagon and loaded in it the cherries, some garden truck and dozens of eggs. Whitey chuckled, "I'll get my horse and haze the beef herd 'long behind your grub wagon, Jim."

"Grub wagon? Hi! I've nigh forgot range stuff. Been away from it so long. . . . Where'll we camp t'night, old timer? . . . Looks like I'd have to be the pilot a swell as the cook."

"And me the horse jingler as well as the cow-punchin' crew," Whitey laughed. "Reckon I can handle that big herd of one cow?"

"Not on horseback," said Jim, and poked the other in the short ribs. "That old bossy never seen a cow-puncher on a horse. She'd balk and you couldn't drive her no place. We'll lead her behind the wagon."

"You mean it, Jim?" Whitey asked blankly.

Jim did, and when at length they were on the way with the haltered old Holstein trailing behind the rig, Whitey mused, "Wonder what the 7 X boys and Bill Dawson'd think if they'd see me now? Salty jerky, how they'd hoorah me!"

The trip was something novel and he really enjoyed every part of this new adventure except meeting Doctor Harney, who exhibited deep concern in seeing Jim Anson cavorting around like a young man. Confronting Whitey, Harney said, "See here, whatever your name is, Anson's got to take care of himself."

His tone riled the easy-going old cowhand, "Bet you he's happier'n he's been in years. Shuckins, Doc, layin' round and imaginin' he's sick'd sure kill him."

"I can see you're a tough old ranger who wouldn't understand. But didn't Mrs. Calloway tell you that her father's heart . . ."

"Bunk!" snorted Whitey. "His heart's in the right place, if that's what you mean!"

As if to prove June's and the doctor's worry unfounded in the days that immediately followed, Jim Anson continued to astonish his daughter with renewed vitality and zest for life. June admitted to Whitey, "Your being here is the best tonic imagina-

ble for Dad. Such wonderful plans he's making for the future—with you."

But Whitey soon became aware that Jim's son-in-law, Tom Calloway, did not share their glowing plans. The old hand had been eager to make friends with the young farmer, only to discover that they had nothing in common and never would savvy one another. But Smoky Hills! how Tom could turn off the work!

Except in caring for the horses Whitey had no enthusiasm for this sort of work, though he wasn't telling his friend how thoroughly he disliked it. One afternoon when the two oldsters were spraying fruit trees and berry bushes, Whitey tried to make a game of it.

"You say they got some kind of bugs? Like lice or ticks or scab on cows, eh? . . . Well," indicating a small apple tree, "here's a mangy yearlin' with his hoofs bogged in the mud so we can't haze him through the dippin' vat. Bring up your spray gun, Jim, and we'll douse him right here. . . . Hey, now look out he don't hook you!"

Jim Anson failed to warm up to the game. "'Hook you'? Can't you think of nothin' but cows and hosses, Whitey?"

"Uh? Seems you're 'most as wrapped up in this farm work as Tom. And sa-ay, seems to me, Tom and June never stop workin' and never, never get through."

"What of it, Whitey? The chores must be done be-

fore breakfast and after supper. And June has to patch and darn and make clothes for the kids whenever she gets a minute besides."

"Ye-ah?" drily. "I thought I'd seen ranch women chained to jobs, but I hadn't seen nothin'. Don't June never get any fun or . . . ?"

Jim straightened from pumping the spray gun, gazed toward the neat house and said, "Well, me and Tom figured she was 'titled to a nice home, so we got that shack worked over and painted this spring." He snapped his fingers with annoyance. "A mistake, when we didn't have the dough. We borrowed a thousand bucks from a neighbor, Roy Dagwell, on a demand note. Now he's howlin' for it and threatenin' to put an attachment on everything that's loose."

"What the dickens?" said Whitey.

"Not as there is much loose," Jim went on with sudden rancor. "On account of them tough years, there's a big mortgage on this place and stock. . . . That Dagwell debt sorta eats on June, makes her keep a-jumping to gather every egg and every cherry and . . ."

"Jim," Whitey interrupted impulsively, "happens I can take this Dagwell off your necks. Money never meant a lot to me, 'cause I never needed much of anything for myself. You take this roll and—"

"No! We— I couldn't take— We got pride, ain't we? Forget it, old horse."

"Keep your shirt on, Jim. Remember you mentioned me buyin' in with you?"

"Uh-huh. Now I had an idea if we raised enough grain and hay this year, we'd feed a bunch of lambs. You to buy 'em, Whitey."

"Thunderation, Jim, you mean steers, don't you? I'd get a kick out of feedin' young steers. But sheep! You sure have got a long way off the trail for an ol' cowman."

"More money in sheep feedin'," stated Jim doggedly. And then, eagerly, "How you likin' it, Whitey? . . . Reckon you can plant yourself here and be happy like me?"

"Sure, Jim, sure!" agreed Whitey, but although he was honestly trying to fit himself into this new life, he simply could not wipe his old interests out of mind.

About now he ought to be drifting the young 7 X steers off the flats and back up into the hills. Yes, and throwing the cows and calves on the Forest Reserve. How were the yearling heifers on Blue Fork doing? Getting late for poison weed to be dangerous, yet a fellow ought to be keeping an eye on it in many different spots on the 7 X's far flung range.

Who the Sam Hill was filling his boots right now? Doggone it! Whoever was taking over his job would get his string of saddle ponies. Jarred on a man something terrible just to think of some other geezer riding his pet horses!

At dusk of the next day, he was dawdling at the stable for a few moments after feeding and watering the farm horses and his own roan, when he heard

voices in the nearby cow barn where Tom Calloway was milking.

"But, Dagwell, we can't pay you."

Dagwell sounded belligerent. "I'm going to get tough if you don't, Tom!"

"Aw, lay off me!" Tom retorted. "Can't you see I've got an awful load? Interest and taxes and grub bills and the old man to take care of."

"Yeh?" said Dagwell. "Yet I seen Jim busyin' himself a heap lately. Who's the other old freak?"

Whitey Sloan doubled his right fist. "Old freak!"

"Friend of Jim's," said Tom. "And though I don't want to beef, it's Jim's fault that June and me have got that old pensioner boarding on us. He's no darned good at farm work and never will be."

Under his breath Whitey gritted, "Pensioner boarding on us? Doggone his hide, I'll . . . No, I won't! Punchin' his nose'd make things heaps worse."

Silently he moved away from the stable and on to the house. It was the hour for his customary gab fest with old Jim, when, eyes aglow, they relived adventures of long ago. But tonight Jim Anson had put himself to bed and, judging from his low moans, he seemed to be in pain.

"Matter, old head?" Whitey asked solicitously. Bending closer, he added, "Don't you know me?"

"Sure," mumbled Jim, yet Whitey realized his mind was far from clear.

With a sudden happy idea taking shape in his own

mind, the old hand got a tablet of paper and a pencil. "Little somethin' I want you to put down on paper just like I tell it to you, Jim."

The man's hand shook a good deal as he wrote what Whitey dictated and eventually signed his name.

When he had the tablet again Whitey asked, "Know what you said, Jim?"

Jim mumbled, "Eumnn . . . Let me feel your hand, Whitey. You 'member that black night when you and me was tryin' to—to— It's like that now. Dark. Awful dark."

The voice trailed off and Whitey felt Jim's hand go limp in his. A lump welled up in his throat, choking him, and then he heard Myrtle at the door, asking, "Grandpa asleep, Uncle Whitey?"

"Asleep? Yes honey, he's asleep. He'll sleep a long, long time. S'pose you go call your mama while I make talk on the telephone. Though what good the doc can do is more'n I know."

Three days later Whitey saddled his roan and tied his war sack in front of his saddle. Then he stooped and gathered Jimmy and Myrtle, one in each arm. They were tearful now, not because Grandpa was gone, but because they knew Uncle Whitey was leaving them and the farm.

"See what I've got for you," soothed the old hand. "Boy-size quirt I braided myself for you, Jimmy; braided belt that'll just fit you, Myrtle."

The children were finding joy in these wonderful

presents when June Calloway walked over to Whitey and his horse. She was mopping at her eyes and she had trouble with her voice as she began,

"I can't begin to thank you for all you did for Dad those last days of his life. I'm sorry, too, that Tom and I were so busy we didn't seem to have time to be friendly. Is it too late to tell you that you helped me? Helped me so much?"

Whitey held out his hand to June. "I'm mighty glad if I was of some use. . . . Nothin' turned out like Jim and me figured, yet maybe things'll be a mite easier for you from now on, June."

"Oh, they will, Whitey. They will! You see, daddy gave us the nicest surprise! Among his things was a note he'd written, saying he'd been holding out some money for an emergency. A 'cache' he called it. The note told where we'd find it, buried in a tin can."

"Well, I never!" said Whitey. "Jus' like good ol' Jim. Fifty, sixty dollars, maybe?"

"*You'll* be surprised, too! Dad left us nine hundred dollars! Almost enough to pay off Dagwell!"

"I know how you and Tom want to get that skinner off your necks, June, so take this hundred bucks. . . . Yes you must take it, and let it half-way pay for my board and keep I never really earned. . . . Goodbye and good luck." He stepped spryly into his saddle and kicked the roan to a lope.

Bill Dawson was a night owl. At one o'clock in the morning he was in his den reading a mystery

story when somebody rapped softly, and he heard, "Hi, Bill!"

The cowman opened his door and saw Whitey Sloan blinking his washed-out eyes in the glare of light. There was the dust of a long trail on him, and his weariness somewhat dimmed the eagerness and the glow of anticipation on his lined old face.

Dawson indicated a chair, and chuckled inaudibly before he said, "I thought you'd pulled up stakes for good, old timer."

"Well, well," stammered Whitey, and then blurted, "You see, Bill, ol' Jim cashed in and I couldn't go that farmin' stuff without him. So I— So I . . ."

Bill Dawson said, "Sorry to hear about Jim," and waited for the cowhand to go on.

"So I," said Whitey desperately, "dropped back here just to—to tell whoever you put in my place some things about the range, and the cattle, that a new man had ought to savvy."

The ranchman's eyes were twinkling as he nodded. "That's fine. . . . You've got some new plans for yourself, Whitey?"

"We-ll, we-ll. Sure I'm figurin' to . . . Bill, who's fillin' my boots here on 7 X?"

Dawson couldn't go on with the game. He clapped a hand on the knotty old timer's shoulder. "Nobody! And nobody's thrown a saddle on one of your string of ponies."

"Nobody!" echoed Whitey, eyes and face lighting.

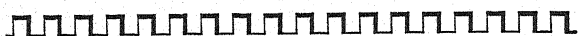
"Nobody!" joy lifting his voice. "Bill, does that mean . . ."

"It means exactly what you think it does! I knew you'd be back."

"Uh? Old socks, you couldn't have knowed that. Not for sure nohow."

"Not for sure?" Dawson was laughing at him. "Whitey, you can't teach an old dog new tricks, and you're an old cow dog!"

S T E P H E N
P A Y N E



Sorta Tough—on the Cattle

THE small pond of stinking water, misnamed Soda Lake, always reminded Smith Clark of a dark mirror in a heavy white frame. This frame was rank alkali upon which nothing grew. Except for sparse grass, nothing grew on the wide plains surrounding it, no shrubs, no sagebrush, no trees and, for as far as the eye could reach, no fence, no house or even a lone sheepherder's wagon. Nothing, except the brown ribbon of road which led from Windcut across this desolate expanse toward canyon-scarred mountains against the western skyline.

On this bleak November evening that skyline was invisible, and the lake was churned and white-capped by a brutal north wind. All of today, all of last night and all of the day before, this wind had beaten steadily against Smith Clark as he made a hand with

Guy Lowell's small beef herd enroute from the mountains to the loading pens at Windcut. Still bracing his sturdy shoulders against the blast, Clark was now leading the one pack horse ahead of the herd along the north rim of Soda Lake, intending to make camp at its east end.

Although the man's hands and arms and feet were numbed to insensibility, and his lean-jawed blond face felt like a frozen mask, he uttered no complaint. He'd always figured to hold up his end at any cow-punching job, taking the tough breaks with the good. Just this one more night on the trail, and tomorrow the cattle would be yarded and loaded on the cars. His job with Guy Lowell would be over—and soon forgotten.

A grin quirked Clark's wind-chapped lips; his wind-reddened eyes twinkled. Wrong! Not soon forgotten would be Guy Lowell's grouching and cursing, his everlasting bossing, his damnably smug I'm-better-than-you and know-it-all attitude, and lastly, his welshing on the job.

For one other reason Clark'd never forget this drive. Though neither mentioned it, both Clark and Lowell knew that for all of the six days they had been on the trail the shadow of a girl had stood between them.

Guy Lowell, prosperous owner of the Double L, had been giving Marjorie Galen a great rush. Yet—so the rangeland grapevine reported—it seemed she couldn't completely forget a certain hired man on



horseback named Smith Clark, and Lowell was still uncertain whether or not he was to become the one-and-only for Marjorie.

Bluff Galen, Marjorie's shrewd, four-square cowman dad, strongly favored Guy Lowell, and once Clark had overheard him telling his foreman with marked irritation, "A daughter's sure a puzzlin' critter, Jeff. . . . Maybeso my little girl's seen too much of that triffin' Smith Clark."

Maybeso, Clark agreed, seeing how he and Marjorie had sort of grown up together on Bluff Galen's Wagonwheel spread. From the ripe age of ten he had worked for the Wagonwheel, except when, every so often, Bluff Galen exploded over some impish prank or some downright boner and fired young Clark with the threat, "Never again'll I take you back!" This disturbed happy-go-lucky Clark not at all, for come roundup or bronc-busting time, Foreman Jeff Harris always needed an expert cowhand who'd cheerfully risk his neck breaking the Wagonwheel broncs or chouse cows sixteen hours a day with never a whimper.

Late this fall Galen had again fired Clark. Reviewing the incident, while he prepared to pitch camp on Soda Lake, Clark recalled the old man's saying, "Look here, cub, if you're ever going to amount to a hill of beans it's high time you buckled down to something besides punching cows. This winter you blister your hands on a pitchfork handle!"

Clark had chuckled, "That nickname they tied onto



you fits like a good saddle fits a horse. You won't be that tough on me. You're bluffing."

Five minutes later Smith Clark had had his pay check in the amount of seven dollars, and had orders to pack his war sack and pull his freight. "Needn't hang around in the hope of seein' Marjorie, neither. She knows you're only a two-bit saddle-pounder who's never saved a dime."

Clark, who had never figured saving as either a

virtue or a necessity, was almost gloomy serious as, astride his brown horse, Steady, he headed over the hill. It must have been a quirk of Fate that he met up with black-browed Guy Lowell, who usually passed the cowpuncher with a mere nod. On this day, however, he surprised Clark with a deep-voiced, "Say, fellow, I wonder can Galen lend me a man to help drive my beef to Windcut?"

It had been Lowell's custom to sell his marketable cattle to some local buyer. This year he had obviously decided to do his own shipping, and was short of help. Clark knew some of the reasons why hired hands never worked long for this man, but he couldn't afford to be choosy, so he replied, "I'm footloose, Guy."

And after a momentary hesitation, during which it was quite possible that Guy Lowell considered the pleasure he would have in bossing this particular hand and riding him hard, Lowell said, "You're on."

They had clashed early the following morning, when Clark learned the kind of trail drive his new boss contemplated—a two-man packhorse outfit with an extra saddle horse for each rider.

"Should be at least three of us," the cowpuncher argued. "Handlin' a pack horse and doing all our own cooking makes a sight of extra chores. Especially when we've got to night-herd."

Lowell bit off his words. "If there are extra chores you'll do 'em. Don't forget I'm the boss."

Clark quirked one sandy eyebrow. "You ain't likely to let me forget it, Guy. . . . Now this here grub supply. . . . With six nights on the trail we should have . . ."

"I've set out the stuff we'll take. S'posin' you shut up and pack it on that horse!"

And that initial clash had proved a good example of Lowell's domineering arrogance for all of the six days they had now been on the trail. Heretofore, cowmen and foremen with whom easy-going Clark had worked had treated him as an equal, had acted human and had done their share of the work with no thought or idea of being superior to the hired man on horseback. But this trip Clark had not only been unable to develop any remote sense of camaraderie with his boss—he'd done two men's work.

He'd been mightily tempted to quit, but the code of the range wouldn't let him. When you took a job you gave unstinted loyalty to your boss and your outfit; you did your best to hold up your end, and you never, never quit an outfit or a herd in a pinch. And Smith Clark reckoned from the way Guy Lowell had "poured it on him" all these days and nights that the man well knew he wouldn't ride out and leave him in the lurch.

Now at the east end of the wind-lashed lake, Clark rode in widening circles looking for fuel with which to build a fire. Failing to find one scrap of wood—or even one dry cow chip—he shrugged weary shoulders

and dismounted, bracing himself against the gale while he unlashed the pack and let bed roll, panniers and pack saddle fall.

His puckered eyes found this camp site indescribably forlorn, and with deep sympathy for the two dejected horses he said, "Cheer up, nags. Tonight and one more day, then we can laugh about it. . . . Ye-ah, and when campfire liars begin tuning up, I'll say, 'Speakin' of wind, I mind the time when I crossed Windcut plains in a breeze that turned the steers' horns wrong side to. Sure was funny to see them critters with their horns p'intin' back 'stead of forward.'"

From one of the panniers he took out a gallon can, once a syrup can, which he had filled with water back at the last campground. It was there he'd had his last meal—and his last smoke, for not even an expert cowhand could roll a cigarette in the fury of this wind. As the gale now almost ripped the can from his numb fingers, he realized that the precious water had leaked out.

Clark said, "Hell!" with considerable feeling. Then he grinned. Guy Lowell was going to have something more to beef and grouch and cuss about. Something he'd not forget. This last night on the trail was sure going to be a honey!

Mounting, the cowpuncher rode out into the wind-churned puddle and bent from his saddle to fill the can. His thirsty horse sniffed of the water and raised its head, upper lip curled in scornful disgust. Where-

upon Clark said, "Persnickity! Act like you'd been raised a pet."

He filled the small coffee pot from his can and then checked the food supplies, desperately hoping he'd find something in one of the panniers overlooked till now. But there was only a small chunk of bacon, some flour mixed with baking powder and salt, half a pound of ground coffee, a small can of salt and a half-pint of blackstrap molasses.

If Guy Lowell had listened to cowpuncher Clark there would have been canned tomatoes and beans and crackers, something to tide them over tonight. As it was, the man who never admitted he was wrong and never forgot he was the boss would howl louder than a thwarted coyote.

The puncher's search had unearthed two iron picket stakes and a roll of cotton clothesline, and his gaze travelled from those items to the bed roll. Last night Clark had driven the picket stakes deep in the ground and with the clothesline had firmly anchored the tarp-covered bed to keep it from blowing into separate parts and sailing across the prairie. He'd done this not for his own comfort or protection, for he had not been in the bed at all last or even the night before; he'd done it for Guy Lowell's comfort.

"I'd better stake 'er down again," he thought, and looked up to see his employer riding in, leading the two extra saddle horses.

"Why ain't you got a fire, Clark?"

"Shall I hack up the pack saddle and burn it, Guy?"

Maybeso it'll give us enough wood to boil up some of this wet stuff outa the lake. Spiked with plenty coffee, it'll make a man beg for more."

There was no spark of humor in Lowell's dark eyes; his full-cheeked face was blue with the cold. "You've got a warped sense of humor, cowboy," he retorted. "Even the fool cattle won't drink this stuff, and the smell of it turns my stomach. . . . Can't you find no wood?"

Clark shook his head. "Oh, well, what's the diff?" he drawled. "It'd take a heap sight smarter man'n me to make and hold a fire in this breeze. Reckon we'll take our eats cold and raw, and like 'em. Bacon and flour, boss. And you'll love the new, improved way of serving coffee. Chaw on a mouthful and wash it down with . . ."

"You ain't a bit funny," Lowell growled. The wind caught his forty-dollar hat and swept it away, and he howled, "Get it, Clark! Get my hat!"

Watching the hat sailing like a kite and with the speed of the wind, Clark said, "If you figure your horse can outrun your lid, get it yourself. I'll betcha four bits he can't. . . . I mind the time Johnny Bates chased his brand-new skypiece fourteen-odd miles across these same plains, wore his nag down to a whisper, and never got within gunshot of the hat."

"Darn it, man, you could have *tried!*" Lowell cursed wind and country and cowpunching. "Talk about misery and grief and hard work! I'm fed up!

And bareheaded I'll catch a horrible cold. Give me your skullcap."

"No can do," said Clark. His own hat was anchored to his well-shaped head by a leather thong. Otherwise he might have lost it fifty times today. Under the hat he wore a black silk skullcap, gift of Marjorie Galen. For that reason he'd not part with it. However, from one of the panniers he produced a soiled rag. "Tie this around your noodle, Guy."

Lowell swung slowly and stiffly to the ground. "Fix me up, Clark. My hands are too cold to tie a knot. What wouldn't I give for a big swig of whisky."

Clark made an improvised cap, tying it in place with a portion of the cotton clothesline, saying as he worked, "Them black clouds yonder mean blizzard. Bad water, no feed, no shelter. Sorta tough on the cattle. Tonight, Guy, the dogies are going to be fierce to hold."

"Rot. They're tired. They'll be glad to lie down. . . . Help me change my saddle to Prince."

Again the puncher helped his boss, saving Lowell's saddle blanket from following his hat down wind. "Now you give me a hand," he suggested.

But, clambering into his saddle on the fresh horse, Lowell answered curtly, "You'll make out all right on *raw bacon* and *raw flour*. Yeah, you're tough as a barbed wire fence. But I can't go it. I don't have to, now Windcut's within striking distance. You hold the herd. I'll be back after daybreak."

He had moved Prince forward when Clark's sud-

denly harsh voice stopped him and turned him half around. "Sure, you're the boss. But think what you're doing!"

"Darn it! I've got to see about the stock cars and if we can get into the yards tomorrow."

Clark controlled his flare of temper. "That's a poor excuse! You know the stage driver told us—"

The rest was lost on the wind, for Lowell had goaded Prince to a lope. Through narrowed eyes Clark watched horse and rider diminish in the distance across the inhospitable expanse, and all his thinking was disturbed and roily. The stage from Windcut to the mountains travelled this road, and this morning driver Yates had stopped to make talk. Lowell's stock cars would be on hand and the stockyards empty tomorrow, Yates had reported.

Then he had given Lowell a letter, and Smith Clark had seen the address on the envelope, "Mr. Guy Lowell, % Stage Driver Bob Yates, Windcut," in Marjorie Galen's hand.

This letter had recalled to the cowboy that on the same day the rancher had fired him Bluff Galen and his daughter were leaving the Wagonwheel on a hurry-up trip to Missouri to buy purebred bulls. It was highly probable that Galen and Marjorie, back from this trip, were putting up at Windcut tonight!

"Eumphm," murmured Clark through tight, wind-chapped lips. "The letter told old Guy the girl'd be there. Even so, he hadn't no right to duck out on me!"

With sharp resentment aflame in him, he chewed

on a handful of coffee and went about changing his saddle to Steady, his fresh horse. He'd punched cows all his life, and he could make out to saddle in a forty-mile wind, single-handed. 'Twould be sweet revenge to burst in on Lowell and Marjorie at the hotel and say, "You set the example of quitting your herd, Guy, so you've got no howl coming. . . . Go nightherd your dogies yourself. I'll take over entertaining Marjorie."

He recognized this thought as being little, mean, even contemptible, and hard on its heels crowded another. What would the spirited girl, whose brown hair was spun silk, say to him? Raised a cowgirl, the unwritten code of the range ran as strongly in her as it did in the professional puncher and foreman and cattle owner.

Though a forty-a-month cowhand couldn't be stopped from dreaming, when he faced reality, he had nothing to offer the girl. Lowell had everything, and Lowell had beaten his time. So it'd make no difference now what Marjorie or her dad would think of Smith Clark. He'd find a sort of wicked enjoyment in showing up Guy Lowell. After that, he'd take himself to some new range.

Grabbing another mouthful of the coffee before the wind took the package, Clark stepped into his saddle and pointed Steady townward. He had gone no more than fifty yards when a sound that lifted above the shriek of wind forced him to raise his bridle hand. The three hundred cattle in Lowell's

herd had spurned the water of Soda Lake; bellowing their thirst and their hunger and their disgust with this vile weather, they had about-faced and were taking the back trail. The trail home!

Yet even before the cattle attracted his attention, Clark had realized he could not desert them. He let go a heartfelt oath, wheeled Steady and loped to overtake the herd. The three extra horses, pack horse and two saddlers, followed the cowboy, dropped in with the herd and thereafter remained with it.

"Hoddoo! You knot-headed scrubs!" the puncher yelled, fighting to stop the dumb brutes and to turn them. "Plant your hoofs and bed down. Hoddoo! Hikey!"

Sweat sprang out on Steady's brown flanks, and Clark no longer felt frozen. Working like a buzz saw on a log, he turned the cattle, only to find that he could not hold them. They had no least idea of bedding down in this unsheltered country, and with the smell of the snowstorm carrying to them on the cutting wind. They were bent to drift ahead of that wind, and no one cowboy on earth could stop them. With Lowell's help, inefficient though it was, Clark might have managed. But alone!

Full darkness came on with a rush. Borne on the teeth of the gale, out of that blackness came shrieking the blizzard. Yet Clark was not giving up! "Since they're bent to travel, why not take 'em to Windcut?" he thought. "If I can force 'em to walk quartering to the wind instead of with it, I can do it."

Smith Clark pulled over to the right of the dark mass, and with rope and voice, and forcing his horse against the leaders, he finally turned the animals eastward. He couldn't see the road, or any landmarks, or even a star. But if he kept his left cheek against the wind he'd be going in the right direction.

One thing was in his favor; the cattle after being trailed for six days had become an integrated whole, sticking together like a band of sheep and following the leaders. Those leaders, cowpuncher Clark held to the right direction, moving on and on through the howling, dismal darkness.

As the increasing cold bit into Clark's bones, he recalled brief notices in the Windcut paper: "Sheep-herder found frozen to death." Except possibly the owner of the sheep, nobody paid much attention to such notices. Nobody would pay much more if the next issue of the Windcut Sentinel stated: "Cowpuncher found frozen to death."

Aw, shuckins! Nothing like that was going to happen. Yet although he was constantly kicking his feet against his stirrups, and slapping his hands against his body and legs, a cruel ache was running through his entire body. Worse still, loss of sleep and hunger were wearing him down at last. He was fighting to keep awake. How he wanted to slide off his horse and lie down and let go. But he must take care of these jug-headed cattle. Must!

He became aware how stupid and groggy he had become when the herd rammed up against a wire



fence strong enough to bring them to a halt. A fence meant he was getting tolerable close to Windcut, where the road ran in a fenced lane. Now to force the cattle into the teeth of the snow-laden gale until they cross-cut the lane.

The eerie, long-drawn, dismally forlorn whistle of a locomotive confirmed his belief he was near the town. And as if that whistle were a signal, the hungry, thirsty, confused steers, silent for many hours, responded with mournful and continuous bellowing.

"Like a man when he's up against it, hollering to relieve his feelings or praying," Clark thought.

Spurring his weary horse to renewed efforts, yelling at the cattle, beating them with his rope, he tried to send them north into the wind, along the fence. All his superhuman efforts succeeded in doing was to keep the animals from drifting south.

Faithful old Steady was winded, his rider had worn out his arms and his voice, and the cattle were breaking past, heading south with the blizzard, when there came a shout, "Yo-ho! Where are you?"

Clark thought he must have fallen asleep. He was imagining that he was still astride his horse, and working. He must either be dreaming or already dead, for it couldn't really be the voice of Marjorie Galen!

But a snow-plastered horse and rider loomed out of the white wall of the storm, the rider so heavily bundled up that at arm's length only her voice identified her to the cowpuncher. "Am I thankful the cat-

He started bawling! Otherwise I'd not have found you, Clark."

"Marjorie!" the man ejaculated. "You shouldn't be out on a night like this!"

He heard the soft music of the girl's clear laughter. "I brought you dad's cowhide overcoat. And overshoes and mittens, too. Can you put them on?"

"I'll make out to do it," the puncher replied.

Marjorie untied a bulky bundle from her saddle and helped him into overcoat, overshoes and mittens. At the moment he was too wonder-filled with that thought of her having come to find him that he did not clearly realize that if she had not arrived he'd have lost his life. That thought came later.

"I see you've got your skullcap," she said.

"It's the only thing that's saved my big ears. . . . Marjorie, you must get inside somewhere. And quick."

"If you can take it, so can I! You're something like a quarter-mile south of the road. Were you trying to get the cattle to the stockyards?"

"Yes. They just wouldn't lie down, or stand still, so . . ."

"Well, let's finish the job."

And now there were two efficient cowhands instead of one. They shoved the reluctant, stubborn, protesting cattle along the fence into the storm, and arrived at the lane and travelled along it.

Regardless of hunger and weariness, Clark was happier than he could ever remember. Happier even than when he'd won his first job as a horse-wrangler

on the Wagonwheel. With Marjorie's help he was going to win out and yard those cattle!

But with victory in sight, disaster met the two riders. They were almost to the stockyards, north of town, the railroad tracks yet to be crossed, when a passenger train, its windows dim squares of light in the white veil of storm, came streaking along, and the herd took the back trail in a mighty surging rush.

Riding hard, Marjorie and Clark stopped that run somewhere about one mile from where it had begun. After this, they could not drive the frightened herd back toward the stockyards.

The girl moved her horse close to the puncher's and for the first time Clark heard strain and weariness in her voice. "What will we do?" she asked. "Camp here with them till daybreak and help comes?"

"No, Marjorie, I can't and I won't have you sticking it out here any longer."

"You'd do it if you were alone, Clark."

"Sure, and I'll stick now. But you must get inside."

"No! I'm sticking too."

No Guy Lowell about her! What had Guy told her, and what had she told him? How come, too, that her dad and Lowell ever let her ride out into this storm?

Clark said wistfully, "If we only could pick up a few milk cows, not scared of the tracks and the trains, we'd make it yet."

"Of course!" Marjorie agreed, so exultantly he wished he could see the expression on her face. Yet

he had a picture of her in his mind's eye that he had kept for years. "Dad bought a carload of bulls," she went on joyfully. "Gentle, pokey things, most of them halter-broken. They're under a shed in the yards. Though I don't think I could drive them anywhere in this storm, I do believe I can lead a couple of them out here."

"And when you turn them loose they'll head back to the shelter of the yards! But one of us must stay with these spooky steers."

"All right. You stay; and don't freeze. I'll be back soon."

A lump filled Clark's dry throat as he watched Marjorie vanish into the stormy night. It seemed as if a year went by before, at long last, he heard her call, and after riding around the closely packed, sullen herd, he made out that she had brought two bulls.

"They're ornery," she called. "So you turn them loose."

Quickly he complied. Whereupon bulls and steers sniffed of each other, and set up a great bawling, which died away when the bulls, deciding they'd had enough of this odd treatment and of the storm, struck out for the stockyards. With Clark pointing the head, the steers followed, and this time no train appeared at an inopportune moment.

When the outer gate of the stockyards slammed shut behind the last steer, and the three Double L extra horses, Clark sucked in his breath. "We did it,

Marjorie! Now to put the little bulls back where they belong and feed the steers."

Here, protected by the numerous plank fences, Clark saw the girl eyeing him oddly. "You've done enough," she declared.

"But these poor steers have had a powerful lot of grief. Yeah, this has been sorta tough on the cattle. They need a bellyful of hay before they're loaded out."

"Sorta tough—on the cattle!" the girl repeated with significant emphasis. "I'll remember that!"

Clark quirked his eyebrows and grinned. "I get it!" he said. "Now I'll wake up old man Drake, who manages these yards. . . . He'll be awful happy to roll outa his warm nest and scatter three tons of baled hay. . . . Please go to the hotel, Marjorie."

"I'm sticking with you, cowboy, till you say the job's done!"

At half-past five the dining-room of Windcut's main hotel opened for early customers, and two minutes later a young man and a young woman selected a table and sat down. The man's face sported a week's growth of sandy whiskers and his red-rimmed eyes looked like burned holes in a blanket.

The girl's pretty, vivid face was unnaturally red. Her lips were chapped, and her large brown eyes were reddened as if she'd been out in vile weather. But there was something in those lovely eyes Smith

Clark had not believed he'd see there for him alone, of all men!

"Golly, to think I'm getting to eat breakfast with *you!*" he began, when a well-known voice in the adjacent lobby drew his attention.

"Sure I woke you up, Guy. Better be rattlin' your hocks out to Soda Lake."

Marjorie looked steadily across the table at Clark, her lips tight, her eyes unsmiling, and through the open door he saw Guy Lowell and old Bluff Galen.

"What's the big yank, Bluff?" Lowell retorted. "You told me that knot-headed cowpuncher was dependable. . . . Well, I'll be—!"

He had seen Smith Clark, and Clark saw his mouth drop open, then close with a snap while his heavy, dark face turned white.

Lowell gripped Bluff Galen's shoulder. "He— He's in there, Bluff. The low-down cur! Quit my herd and come to town. . . . God knows where my cattle are now!"

Due to her position at the table, Lowell had not seen Marjorie. Galen shook the man's hand from his shoulder and said harshly, "Get away from me, Lowell. I sort of spoke my mind last night. Can't you take a hint? We're through!"

At this moment the hotel clerk called, "Drake at the stockyards on the phone, Mr. Lowell. Wants to talk to you."

"Don't want to talk to him," growled Lowell.

"All right, Mr. Lowell. But Drake says he's got word your cars are on the siding and the freight agent wants to know how soon you can load out."

"Load out! Ha-aa! What a laugh!" Lowell's own laugh was hollow. "It'll be a week before I find my cattle, and they'll look like greyhounds instead of beef steers."

"Drake says your steers are in the yards, filled up on hay and resting first class."

Lowell gasped, "What the devil? Let me talk to Drake!"

Bluff Galen appeared at the dining-room door, stopped and stared at the puncher and at his daughter. "Marjorie Galen, how'd you get out of this hotel last night without me seeing or hearing you? I just now missed my coat and overshoes and mittens, so I know what you've done!"

"It wasn't hard," said Marjorie. "Of course I knew you wouldn't let me do what I had to do. I lied to the hostler at the livery stable, too, or I might not have got a horse to ride. . . . Are you awfully mad, daddy?"

A broad smile broke Galen's face before he answered, "Yes, Marjorie, as you can see, I'm a-boilin'. . . . Well, Clark, I reckon if Guy Lowell's honest he'll figure out in time that the best man won. . . . And Clark, it looks mighty like I'm going to have to give you a steady job for the rest of your natural days. Somethin' I'll be unreasonably proud to do, son."

As Clark rose and gripped Galen's hand, he saw Guy Lowell having his look at him and at the girl he had lost, and he saw the man's arrogance and pride drain out of his heavy face, leaving it naked and ashamed.

THE END